Virtual English village: A task-based English learning platform in Second Life

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Abstract: The purposes of the current study are to develop a virtual English learning village for elementary EFL learners in Taiwan to allow them to learn English beyond the regular school schedule. Four learning contexts were developed and used by 117 EFL learners from an elementary school in Taipei City for around 5 months. Learners' motivation of learning English via executing language tasks in this virtual village were evaluated through questionnaire administration. The results reveal learners' positive perception of the English learning mode as proposed in this study. Thus, a task-based English platform in virtual worlds can be a potential solution to the problems of the lack of authentic contexts nowadays in the traditional EFL settings, and consequently is able to provide elementary-school EFL learners with an immersive environment for building authentic experiences.

Keywords: Virtual worlds, task-based learning, English as a foreign language (EFL), English village

1. Introduction

In the digital era, English is regarded as an international language to which IT is widely applied in various fields around the world. In non-English-speaking countries, such as Taiwan, English proficiency is highly valued as a requisite feature of participating competitively in the international community (Lan, Sung, & Chang, December 2009). Traditionally, Taiwanese students often learn and practice English in static and old classroom activities, instead of learning from genuine or real world simulations of daily life. More and more teachers or scholars believe that a scenario environment is a pivotal component necessary for the acquisition of language (Lan, 2014). A meaningful language must be learned in conjunction with society, culture and personally relevant life experiences (Hedberg & Alexander, 1994 ; Krashen, 1981).

From this ideological frame of references, 12 elementary schools in Taipei City are selected and supported by the Taipei City Government to establish active and kinesthetic learning environment which is called *English Village*, hoping that children can begin to dream of a life with a broader and more global perspective. The 12 chosen schools designed the English Villages based on the consideration following specific pedagogical purposes of their own schools. However, similar topics such as airport, local culture, restaurant, post office, hospital, etc. could be found in different Villages owned by different elementary schools. Typically, each English Village is not only used by the students of the elementary school with that Village, but it is also visited by the students from all the elementary schools located nearby in the same educational district due to the limited amount of government budget to support every school to own its own English Village. One obvious problem has been encountered since the Village is established: the lack of opportunity for students to preview the skills needed in experiencing the Village before visiting the setting or reviewing what they have learned or experienced in the setting.

The purposes of this study were to develop and evaluate an authentic learning environment in virtual worlds (Second Life, SL) which aim at providing all the students from the participating or other elementary schools with an immersive environment to pre- and review the materials embedded in

the Village they visit in the real world. The methods are briefly described below, followed by the results and the conclusion.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

117 students from an elementary school having an English Village (Wanfu English Sky Castle, WESC) in Taipei City, with three learning classrooms (the airport, the world style setting, and the setting with the local culture theme), participated in this study. They came to computer lab, logged in the virtual Village to preview or review what they would or had learned in WESC both before and after they visited the setting.

2.2 Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted in the study. Students' perception of English learning in SL was administered and analysed to determine what the participating elementary school learners thought about learning English in such a virtual village.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Usability Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was revised from what was developed by Lan (2014). 22 items of 4-point Likert Scale belonging to 4 dimensions (pragmatic, ease to use, and ease to learn, and satisfaction) are included in the questionnaire to determine the participants' perceptions of English learning in the virtual village.

2.3.2 Virtual English Village in SL

Four learning contexts aimed at providing students with learning scenarios identical to what they experienced in the real English Village (WESC) were developed in Second Life. The contexts include (1) an international airport for learning check-in and passport control, (2) a ring toss game for learning to play the game in a traditional night market in Taiwan, (3) a food court in a night market for learning the names of foods and sentences used for ordering foods in a night market, and (4) a restaurant for learning to order food in a restaurant. Figures 1 and 2 show the real and virtual contexts in WESC and SL used in this study, respectively.

(1)

(2)

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Figure 1. The Real Contexts in WESC Used in this Study: (1) Airport, (2) Ring Toss, (3) Food Court in the Night Market, and (4) Restaurant.

Figure 2. The Virtual Contexts in SL Used in this Study: (1) Airport, (2) Ring Toss, (3) Food Court in the Night Market, and (4) Restaurant.

2.3 Procedure

The study lasted for around 5 months. Each topic was learned for one month, plus another month for trainings on SL operation and questionnaire administration. At the beginning, all the students received the training on using SL, such as moving their avatars, clicking virtual objects, and answering questions in SL. Then all the participating students went to the computer lab once a week to learn the vocabulary words and sentences needed in experiencing the real English Village in their school. Three-stage activities were designed for guiding students to learn the target materials: firstly, learning vocabulary words by clicking the objects in SL; secondly, learning sentences by listening to the demonstration given by the non-player character (NPC); and thirdly, learning to communicate with the NPC via choosing correct responses. All the learning activities in each stage are self-directed. Besides, students will receive feedback from the system while practicing the conversation. They will be also given rewards from the system for having completed the learning targets. After all the learning stage is completed, a usability questionnaire was administered to all the participants for understanding their perception of the learning mode in SL.

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3. Results

Table 1 lists the descriptive results of the usability questionnaire. Based on the data listed in Table 1, it is found that all the dimensions of the questionnaire got pretty high scores from students' responses (above 3 out of 4) and very low standard deviation (less than .01).

Table 1: The descriptive results of the usability questionnaire.

Dimensions	Scores (N=117)	
	Mean	SD
Pragmatic	3.31	.03
Ease to use	3.39	.05
Ease to learn	3.35	.07
Satisfaction	3.35	.07
Total	3.32	.09

In addition to the Mean and SD obtained from all the respondents as listed in Table 1, it is also found that for each item of the questionnaire, near 90 percent of the participants expressed that they extremely agree or agree with it that learning English in the virtual contexts in SL benefited their English learning.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary mission of the English Villages is *environmental stewardship, curriculum integration*, and *a sampling of global cultures*. Using varied subject matters and pedagogies, the English Village aims to develop a variety of lesson formats that can be adapted to the needs of diverse learning styles of elementary school children in keeping with contemporary theories of multiple types of intelligence. By incorporating virtual contexts in virtual worlds into the physical English Village, learning is enhanced by the self-directed and task-based learning platform without special or temporal limitations.

The results of this study are in line with many of the previous TBA researches in SL contexts (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Deutschmann et al., 2009; Grant, 2008; Jee, 2011; Lan, 2014; Nunan, 2004). SL combines network connectivity and virtual reality, providing users with a virtual yet "real" environment in which they can interact socially with others via resident avatars (James, 2005). According to Burdea (1993), a virtual environment consists of three essential features: immersion, imagination, and interaction. Cooke-Plagwitz (2008) suggested that an environment such as SL can inspire language learners to reach learning goals without losing interest or motivation.

Based on the positive results obtained from the current study, it is suggested that virtual learning contexts should be included in regular EFL syllabus for providing elementary school EFL learners with an authentic and immersive English learning which has higher flexibility, lower costs and fewer limitations.

Acknowledgements

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