

# Moving from the Conventional to the Virtual Classroom

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the field experience of two prospective teachers of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) in the teacher-training programme, regarding the differences in pedagogic skills between the face-to-face and the virtual world of Second Life. The student teachers recounted how they made pedagogical changes in relation to the extent of the consciousness raising, decision making and perception towards the different environments. A qualitative approach was primarily adopted to elicit this information from the data that consisted of post-teaching interviews and reflection reports. The preliminary results confirm that, to some extent, the prospective teachers' pedagogical knowledge was influenced by their previous experience (e.g., foreign language learning). The findings derived from a self-rating scale further reveal that the student teachers felt confident about their pedagogical knowledge and skills in the face-to-face context, e.g., conducting activities, but not confident in the virtual classroom, e.g., managing students' conduct. Both the student teachers opined that teaching in the virtual world was feasible to engender the involvement and interest of learners. The teachers' knowledge transferred from the conventional classroom to the virtual world has implications for teacher education.

**Keywords:** Second Life, Chinese as a Second Language, pre-service teacher, reflective practice

## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in emerging technologies or online education to allow access to education to those who cannot attend courses or classes that take place in face-to-face traditional classrooms [2]. In light of this, a three-dimensional multi-user virtual environment (3D MUVES), Second Life (SL) acts as an important platform to simulate real life to provide an immersive and social environment [3]. SL has a huge impact on second or foreign language (L2/FL) education [6], and the game-like environment engages learners in authentic or meaningful interaction.

For teaching on SL, although there are some commonalities between the traditional and the virtual contexts, the pedagogical knowledge and skills of the latter, such as the online tools and organising the learning activities needed for teaching, differ significantly from those required in the former [2]. However, helping pre-service or in-service teachers to develop technical skills consciously to deal with pedagogical and technological difficulties is crucial [2], but research of pre-service teacher training in language education in both physical and on-line classrooms has long been overlooked [4]. Hence, this study attempts to bridge the gap by examining the pre-service CSL teachers' pedagogical knowledge, whereby they modified their instructional use according to the constraints of the virtual environment, e.g., lack of verbal or physical clues. The purpose of this current research is to give the pre-service teachers a hands-on experience and to report on how they felt about teaching in the traditional and the virtual classroom. There are two research questions to be

answered in this paper: 1) How does the previous learning experience relate to the pedagogical knowledge of CSL student teachers during the teaching practice? 2) How does the instructional awareness through reflective practice determine the differences in the two environments?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Participants*

Two female student teachers of CSL, namely, Jessica and Joan (pseudonyms were used to protect their privacy), were involved in this study. The 21-year olds had been studying at the Department of Applied Chinese Language and Literature at National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) and spoke Chinese as their mother tongue. Also participating in this study were 17 preparatory academy students from NTNU, aged between 20 and 26, with multi-cultural backgrounds, such as Vietnam, Japan and Indonesia with an elementary level in Chinese. They were randomly divided into two groups (A and B) and this resulted in 8 students as Group A in the conventional classroom and 9 students as Group B in SL.

### *2.2 Design*

The design of the pre-service teacher training included two stages. In the first stage, the participating student teachers attended 8 weekly face-to-face workshops, each lasting two hours, making 16 hours in total; this helped them become familiar with the two environments (e.g., practise in skills for conducting pair/group work and on SL tools like making/sending a 'notecard'). Furthermore, during this stage, the instructor shared her past teaching experiences and ideas with the student teachers as well as gave them support in designing lessons and activities. They were also taught using L2/FL teaching approaches, e.g., the task-based approach. The purpose of this was to assist them in organising the sequences of a lesson. In the second stage, each student teacher taught both Groups A and B one after the other and employed a given teaching approach to deliver similar teaching contents in the two environments. More importantly, before teaching each lesson, the each student teacher demonstrated their teaching to two experienced tutors in the relevant field, who in turn provided the student teachers with feedback on their teaching contents or approaches. The demonstration of teaching engaged the student teachers in peer discussions.

### *2.3 Instrument*

The research contained two main instruments: 1) student teachers' written reflection reports with detailed descriptions of the implementation steps and objectives including teaching activities and their own opinions/comments on the activities; and 2) post-teaching interviews with an array of semi-structured questions, such as their own previous learning or teaching experience during this training programme.

### *2.4 Procedure and data collection*

There were eight lessons in total, with four lessons each taking place in the conventional classroom (CC) and using Second Life (SL) between December, 2011 and January, 2012; each lesson had one topic and one teaching approach. For instance, one of the lessons, consisting of the topic 'How to get there' and the teaching approach of Audio-lingual

method (ALM), was taught by Jessica. As a result, Jessica and Joan each taught twice in an alternating manner during the second stage; one first taught in CC and then in SL during weeks 1 and 3 while the other did the teaching during weeks 2 and 4. Immediately after each lesson, each prospective teacher was asked to fill in the self-reflection report. When all teaching sessions had been completed, both student teachers were interviewed individually by one of the researchers of this current study. Regarding the participating students, the conventional classroom group attended the CSL lessons on campus at NTNU whereas the other group of students accessed SL from their home, the library or the laboratory at NTNU.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This study examines the prior learning experience of the prospective student teachers in relation to their newly acquired teaching knowledge and how the prospective CSL teachers consciously made changes between the CC and SL. Due to the constraint of space in this paper, we present and discuss only key results from the collected data to answer the research questions that were given previously.

In answer to Research Question 1, the participating student teachers had had scant teaching experience in either a face-to-face classroom or an online environment, but had been learning English as a core subject in formal education since they were 9 years old. Apart from that, both of them had had some experience of learning another foreign language, such as French or Japanese. Jessica commented that learning French had had a huge impact on her pedagogic knowledge growth, and she had been greatly influenced by the language activities conducted in the class. She was even aware of what teaching approaches her French teacher had employed and what activities she performed, stating, *'I like one of my French teachers who happened to be Taiwanese... When in the class, we were instructed to use French as much as possible but only when we came across some new words or unfamiliar expressions in the language we used our own language.... I think she used some kind of task-based approach.... I remember an activity we did was called exchange of information. It's not only useful to learn new vocabulary words, but also to get us to speak French when completing a language task. We also practised dialogues or performed role plays... I really liked her activities... So, when teaching, I had made some changes to those activities to fit my lessons, using pictures to help students practise vocabulary... I truly aspired to her teaching enthusiasm and professional knowledge....'*

Unlike Jessica, Joan rarely talked about any teaching methodologies or activities that her teachers had employed in her Japanese class. However, she did mention that a lack of prior experience in observing how others taught online and insufficient knowledge regarding online resources in Second Life had made it difficult for her to manage teaching in the virtual environment. She commented: *'During the teaching practice, I felt totally lost because I couldn't see students' facial expressions or their body language that would give me a hint of whether they understood me... In one situation where I teleported them to a place for a task, only 3 students were there, and the other 4 students disappeared... I kept moving my avatar here and there to look for the missing ones... perhaps, I've never had experience for online courses or classes... If I got some chances to see how others teach online, I'd have been able to teach more successfully'.*

The preceding paragraphs show how the student teachers' previous learning experiences influenced their current practice of teaching, e.g., how they designed their classroom activities. This, in turn, helped them integrate what they had learned into the new teaching context(s). To some extent, this proves that the teacher-training programme helped them to develop their knowledge and skills through carrying out classroom activities; the implicit knowledge was made explicit via the personal reflections. Besides, the

aforementioned discussions remind us that like experienced teachers reflecting on their teaching, novice teachers like Jessica and Joan, while not having many teaching experiences, still have the ‘faculty to reflect’ [1]. Such newly integrated knowledge built upon the prospective teachers’ tacit knowledge (past learning experience) and their exploration of the theoretical aspects (their own ideological ideas) of the professional initiatives during the teaching practice.

In answer to Research Question 2, both student teachers reported that they were confident about their teaching in the conventional classroom in terms of a) tasks, skills and resources, including questioning and eliciting techniques, presenting and explaining a topic and etc.; b) adoption of teaching methodologies, e.g., TBA and TPR; and c) classroom management, such as giving instructions and managing students’ conduct (see Table 1). In CC, both student teachers rated two components of (a) and (c) at nearly 4, apart from (b), whereas they rated the three aspects with around a score of 2 in SL.

**Table 1 - self-rating of pedagogical skills**

	Tasks, skills and resources (A)		Teaching methodologies (B)		Classroom management (C)	
	CC	SL	CC	SL	CC	SL
Jessica	4.2	2.2	3.7	2.3	3.8	2.4
Joan	3.5	1.8	3.0	2.0	4.1	1.5
Average score	3.9	2.0	3.3	2.2	4.0	2.0

(Note: the numbers indicate a 5-point rating scale: 1-5, from extremely unconfident to extremely confident)

In addition to what has been discussed so far, the two student teachers made some remarks in their self-reflection reports regarding the differences, difficulties and constraints they encountered in SL and the involvement of the participating students between the two environments. Jessica said, *‘In the traditional classroom, I know that when things go wrong I can tell straight away from students’ body language or verbal expressions. I remember that in my first time teaching, I gave instructions for an activity: ‘giving directions’. Students were paired up to complete the task... Perhaps my instruction confused them and that caused them to start having a chat with their partners... However, in the virtual classroom, my first time teaching was chaos... Many students experienced technical problems, their voice breaking down and some of them couldn’t display my power point slides. Suddenly, I got myself into panic... Indeed, I’d found teaching in Second Life more challenging than teaching in the conventional classroom. Virtual teaching not only requires technology skills, like the knowledge of fixing the technical difficulties, but also the knowledge of the language that I am teaching. However, the effects of learning in Second Life were quite straightforward as students were actively engaged in the virtual scenes.*

To echo the point just made by Jessica, an example given from Joan’s reflection illustrated that when teaching students how to order food in Chinese, she noticed that students’ responses were very different in both pedagogical environments. Whereas students in the traditional classroom were likely to be quiet and their responses tended to be short, students in Second Life actively responded to her questions and their utterances were longer with more new vocabulary: *‘When I asked students some questions (in the traditional classroom), such as ‘Did you try watermelon juice before?’, though they seemed to understand my questions, they had come up with very short answers. But, students in SL were more active to give various answers and even give me some new vocabulary words... They were very responsive...’*. Joan went on to say, *‘I felt... umm, perhaps, in the virtual environment, students weren’t afraid to say anything they wanted... but in the face-to-face classroom, students might feel afraid of making errors when speaking...’*

In the above discussions, noticeably, in accordance with their early language learning experiences, the student teachers may have been accustomed to a face-to-face context where

a teacher was in control of the class, and so, when they first came across teaching in SL, they might have felt a loss of control. Such a feeling is not unusual, especially for those who are used to face-to-face classroom teaching or learning. However, community building and socialisation, whereby groups of members in the community share common beliefs and principles, are needed whether in a face-to-face classroom or an online environment [2] [5].

## Conclusion

In this pilot study, we introduced the background of online education as well as the pedagogical benefits of using such a 3D virtual environment for language teaching and learning. Subsequently, the methodology of this study was presented in terms of the research design, including the participants, data, and procedures of data collection. Finally, the preliminary results derived from the post-teaching interviews and the self-reflection reports were given to answer two research questions. This study has some implications for teacher training. Teacher-training programmes are necessary to provide pre-service teachers with practical experiences whether in traditional or virtual settings, and the demand for learning in the virtual world places an emphasis on the need for teachers' knowledge and skills to be appropriate to teaching virtually. To conclude, the scope of this study is confined to describing the experiences of the two participating student teachers teaching in the two different pedagogical contexts; thus, the results of this study cannot be generalised due to the small sample size and inherently qualitative characteristics.

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