

Who Owns the Floor? Examining Participation in a Collaborative Learning Scenario Between Student Teachers and Active Professionals in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of unequal power relations on participation in a group of student teachers and invited professionals in two collaborative workshops in Second Life. The data includes recordings, group reflections, and individual questionnaires. Participation was examined from the aspects of floor space, turn length, and utterance functions and complemented with student reflections. The results show that at a general level, the differences of floor space and turn length between the invited professionals and the students were small. Moreover, the invited professionals did more conversational management than the students, while the students performed more supportive speech acts. There were, however, individual variations.

Keywords: *Collaboration, Discourse Functions, Floor Space, Network, Participation, Second Life, Turn Length, Unequal Power Relations*

INTRODUCTION

A cornerstone in modern pedagogy is the Vygotskian idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978). With modern Web 2.0 technologies and their support for social networking, the possibility of

assembling participants to collaborative events has increased enormously, and in language education, intercultural experiences with more capable native or near native speakers can be readily supplied to second language learners (Guth & Helm, 2010).

A key aspect of developing language skills is *usage*, and creating prerequisites for active conversations where learners develop their language skills is thus of special interest to task designers. It is, however, not necessarily the case that pairing students with capable peers will give

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the desired result. Research shows that powerful individuals (teachers, for example) tend to take more space and control the conversation using discursive strategies such as controlling turn-taking, topic control and using elicitation strategies to maximize talking time (Abdullah & Hosseini, 2012). There is thus a risk that less capable students become intimidated by the situation. For example, Toyoda and Harrison (2002) report that native speakers could manipulate the chat communication in Active Worlds freely and elaborately, while the non-native speakers' lower language proficiency often led to slow responses, and confusions in communication.

In this study, we describe and analyse the outcomes of collaborative activities conducted in Second Life (SL), where a class of student teachers was joined by professionals working with online language teaching and/or research in order to discuss two pedagogic case studies. These professionals were recruited from all over Europe with the help of networks relating to SL and language learning. The focus of our study is on quantitative and qualitative aspects of the participation in the activities, and how these can be related to the various power structures within the groups. As the goal of any activity of this sort is to give students an opportunity to learn as much as possible, participatory patterns are of specific interest.

BACKGROUND

Language Learning, Networking and Social Software

The affordance of online communication in bringing intercultural learners together to create communities of practice and critical inquiry is particularly valuable in collaborative online language learning (Warschauer, 1997). For this purpose, educators are increasingly integrating social software such as blogs, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and SL in CALL. The open architectures of such social media support collective online activities, one of the main advantages being that the social networks of

the students and the teachers can be integrated into the learning context thus adding to the authenticity of the scenario and increasing engagement (Bowers, Ragas, & Neely, 2009; Otto & Pusack, 2009). In the context of this study, our ambition was to integrate the students in existing professional networks, a practice which will be discussed further below.

SL as a Learning Space

One of the most recent developments in online language learning involves the simulation of real world learning in three-dimensional virtual environments (3D VEs), where of the most popular sites is SL (Warschauer & Liaw 2010). Czepielewski (2012) classifies SL as a *Serious Virtual World*, which though initially made for entertainment, cannot be seen as a game. It is rather an open virtual world, where each of the participants can realize his or her own objectives, which may be connected with social life, entertainment business or, indeed, language education. Designed as a place for socialisation, users can communicate in the target language synchronously using voice, chat and instant messaging, asynchronously using the group and private message function as well as note cards and even perform limited human gestures. SL also allows users to create objects and environments, which others can interact with. The 'self' is represented by a so-called avatar, which usually has a human shape (but does not have to). As an open environment with users from all over the world, it has been widely adopted as a learning environment by different educational institutions in the domain of language education where it provides a contextually relevant language learning space for learners to interact with native speakers of a target language (Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009, p. 1). In all, SL affords group-based, project-based and student-centred teaching and learning where multiple avatars can engage in an activity simultaneously (Good, Howland, & Thackray, 2008).

One of the main advantages of using SL in education, however, is the extensive community

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