Chapter 47
Pedagogical Insights Into Hyper–Immersive Virtual World Language Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This article shares pedagogical insights from a qualitative study examining the use of immersive social virtual worlds (SVWs) in language teaching and learning. Recognizing the language learning affordances of immersive virtual environments, this research examines the beliefs and practices of 'Karelia Kondor,' an avatar-learner and teacher of languages with a decade of diverse experiences in Second Life (SL), one of the first widely used SVWs. Findings highlight the relevance of a hyper-immersive and emotionally engaging conceptual model informing language teaching approaches within these rapidly evolving environments. When supported pedagogically, the activities illustrated demonstrate the potential of these immersive approaches to create communities of practice and affinity spaces by fostering investment and autonomy in the language learning process through shared target language experiences. The article will conclude with a summary of pedagogical insights leveraging the affordances of these environments.

INTRODUCTION

The search for innovative, learner-centred ways of teaching and learning have led to the exploration of three-dimensional (3-D) virtual worlds[1] and their emerging applications in language teaching and learning. Virtual world learning platforms that began with Active Worlds, Second Life (SL) and Open Wonderland are rapidly evolving into mobile-friendly augmented reality[2] and virtual world environments including Oculus Rift, Pokemon Go and Project Sansar[3] that have the potential to add an interactive,

simulative dimension into language teaching practices (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009; Loke, 2015; Panichi, 2015; Wang, 2017). These emerging tools offer the potential of hyper-immersive, multimodal target language simulations that cognitively, kinesthetically and emotionally engage learners, activating a range of linguistic, cultural and collaborative resources that can facilitate linguistic, intercultural and 21st century skills (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009; Hanewald, 2013).

Since its launch in 2003, Second Life (SL) has been the most prominent and accessible 3-D multi-user virtual environment used in education (Wang, 2017). Research to date has focused on suggesting ways to use SL (Hismanoglu, 2012), analyzing the environment and the language learning potential (Panichi, 2015). However, many teachers remain unclear how to integrate these dynamic platforms into their language learning environments. Little if any research has examined SL through the eyes of an experienced avatar language learner and teacher, a teacher who has immersed herself within these environments in varied teaching and learning roles using diverse languages over the past decade.

The purpose of this article is to give teachers and researchers pedagogical insights into the potential uses of social virtual worlds (SVWs) in language teaching and learning. This study examines the beliefs and practices of an avatar-learner and teacher with extensive plurilingual experiences in SL. Findings are based on interviews with 'Karelia Kondor', who has learned Italian as an adult, taught French to secondary students and has designed a range of virtual world curricula. She has co-designed and facilitated telecollaborative German language game-based exchanges and has participated extensively in educational communities of practice, all within SL. The study aims to detail perspectives on hyper-immersive SVWs, their benefits, limitations and pedagogical potential to inform language teaching on these platforms through the following research question: What experiences and pedagogical insights inform language teaching and learning practices within these online immersive environments?

This paper will begin with a definition of SVWs, outlining the affordances and limitations of these environments. The theoretical framework informing this study will then be outlined, followed by the study's methodology and a profile of this key informant. An analysis of findings, organized by key themes identified in the data will then be discussed. Links between these themes, language teaching practices and theories will follow. Pedagogical insights to guide online immersive environments will conclude the paper.

DEFINING SOCIAL VIRTUAL WORLDS

3-D virtual worlds (VWs) have been defined by Kozlova & Priven (2015, p. 83) as the most complex modern technologies for their synchronous, multimodal communication, their simulation of real-life experiences and learning spaces that are conceptually different from face-to-face classroom and other online learning environments. Loke (2015, p. 112) defines VWs as "computer-based, multi-user virtual environments that simulate real or fictional life and that users experience using their graphical representations or avatars." According to Panichi (2015, p. 465), the most significant characteristics of 3-D VWs is the immersive nature of the platform, impacting language learning activities and learner engagement. Hanewald (2013) categorizes virtual worlds as either gaming virtual worlds, SVWs or educational virtual worlds. Educational VWs are characterized by experiential learning, having active in-world experiences based on learning particular content or through simulations (Hanewald, 2013, p. 238). Although the gaming and socializing aspects of VWs initially attracted many users, the educational possibilities are now drawing more institutions to explore classroom applications within these environments. The emerg-

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