Chapter XXIV
MMORPGs and Foreign Language Education

Yong Zhao
Michigan State University, USA

Chun Lai
Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the potential of massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMOR-PGs) for foreign language education and discusses how MMORPGs can be better designed to support foreign language education. It reviews current conceptualizations on ideal language learning environments, discusses the potential of MMORPGs for foreign language education, and elaborates on how to design MMORPGs to facilitate foreign language learning. The authors hope that this discussion will help foreign language educators realize and capitalize on the values of MMORPGs in foreign language education, and will guide the design of MMORPGs for foreign language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs), with the features of both games and online communities, are noted for creating immersion experience and for fostering strong interactions and communities. Educators have started to examine the educative values of MMORPGs, and how they can be better used to facilitate education. MMORPGs hold great potential for foreign language education. However, the designs of MMORPGs are crucial to whether the potential is realized. In this chapter, we are to discuss how MMORPGs can potentially create optimal foreign language learning environments and how to design MMORPGs that can facilitate foreign language learning.

TOWARDS OPTIMAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Decades of research in second/foreign language acquisition has yielded guidelines on what an ideal foreign language learning environment should be like. However, challenges abound in materializing these guidelines in current foreign language education contexts.

Ideal Foreign Language Learning Environments

Conditions and Teaching Approach from Cognitive Perspective

Four conditions have been identified to be crucial to successful language learning: rich input from varied sources and elaborative input via negotiation of meaning,[1] ample opportunities for language use in authentic contexts for real purposes, immediate and quality negative feedback through focus on form,[2] and individualized content that respects learner personal learning agenda and developmental readiness (Zhao & Lai, in press). Varied input not only reinforces learners' understanding of the input, facilitating the automatization of the input, but also strengthens learners' capability in using the language in context-appropriate manners. Elaborative input via negotiation of meaning engages learners in active participation and heightens their likelihood to notice certain linguistic forms. Use of language in communication facilitates acquisition in that "it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (Long, 1996, p. 451). Negative feedback, either explicit or implicit, facilitates second language learning via drawing learners' attention to the gaps or holes in their linguistic knowledge, presenting them with positive evidence, and triggering the restructuring of their grammar. Moreover, research findings on individual difference variables such as language learning aptitude and short-term memory justify the importance of the individualization of instruction.

In terms of teaching pedagogy, researchers have suggested that task-based language learning holds great potential to meet the crucial conditions summarized above, and thus could be the most effective way of learning a language (Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 2003). Task-based language learning is acclaimed for situating language learning in real-life activities and for simulating natural language acquisition processes. According to Willis (2004), this teaching approach reflects several basic premises about second language learning:

- Language learning is a complex organic process rather than simplistic linear additions of discrete language items.
- Language is best learned through immersing learners in meaningful activities that bring them rich comprehensible input with focus on form either during or after the meaning-based activities.
- Language learning is indispensable of interaction and meaningful use of the language for real purposes.

Conditions from Sociocultural Perspective

The sociocultural perspective to second language acquisition stresses that second language learning is an enculturation process via extended and assisted participation in socially constructed communicative practices, with more experienced members scaffolding the less experienced (Lantolf, 2000). Language is indexical in nature, indexing the social contexts in which it arises and is used. Thus, although on different grounds, the sociocultural perspective holds similar faith in social interaction as the cognitive and interactionist perspective to second language acquisition. To

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