

Chapter 38

VR–Based Gamification of Communication Training and Oral Examination in a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

The authors present a novel way of oral language training by embedding the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process into a generic 3D Cooperative Virtual Reality (VR) Game. Due to lack of time, resources and innovation, the language classroom is limited in its possibilities of promoting authentic communication. Therefore, the researchers investigated how to induce a VR setting with information gaps, for which they designed a template which intrinsically promotes communication and the students' confidence in using EFL. Thereby, VR enables the simulation of real life situations, creating both comfortable and authentic training environments. The game content is based on the internationally approved Graded Examination in Spoken English (GESE) Trinity Exam and can be adapted to the needs of the learners or the given curricula. The empirical analysis shows that the designed game trains the students' communication skills, evoking a high amount of speech and a qualitative linguistic output.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the language classroom enables a variety of different language learning methods, it is still limited in its possibilities of promoting authentic communication skills. Speaking practice is an important aspect of foreign language learning. However, teachers are too much focused on the production of language in writing as most of the tasks are based on worksheets. Additionally, language learners do not

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have the time to practice their communicative competence satisfactorily. According to a study conducted by the German Institute for International Educational Research, a usual lesson of 45 minutes is too short for every learner to practice speaking sufficiently (German Institute for International Educational Research, 2006). Furthermore, the students' ambition to speak English is motivated extrinsically as the situation in class is not authentic: the students are rather forced to produce language instead of feeling the need for it themselves.

Another important aspect in oral language teaching is innovation: Numerous studies, such as those conducted by Lan, Lin & Kan in 2012, pointed out the need for creative task design and innovative language teaching formats in Virtual Reality to create a most comfortable learning atmosphere for students: VR simulates real life situations in order to create an authentic language training environment. This is useful especially when external factors, such as time and lacking possibilities, do not allow an appropriate covering of the topic. The authors concentrated on this particular call and investigated how to induce a VR setting with information gaps, a sophisticated, communication invoking method. In order to elicit this intrinsic language usage, everyday life situations need to be simulated. Furthermore, these situations are optimized as they provide a safe environment, in which learners are allowed to make mistakes without being afraid of losing their faces in front of their peers or a whole class. They can train their speaking skills in these situations and gain the confidence they need to communicate successfully in the real world. A VR simulating real life situations creates an authentic language training environment, where language is promoted intrinsically.

These claims lead to the question of how the researchers can intrinsically evoke language communication training in a second language within a VR, and whether this can correlate with the language requirements of a given curriculum in order to improve authentic language acquisition and training. The authors' central contribution is to answer this question by presenting a game design template that creates a high density of information gaps in a virtual environment. Adding components of the GESE curriculum enabled the authors to implement the language training game *Haunted*. It promotes language learning and practice because the communication between the players, which is intrinsically evoked by information gaps, is necessary for succeeding. The intrinsic language usage is increased by simulating an everyday life environment without the threat of embarrassment during language practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many language researchers, including Blake (2008) and Hall (2011), agree with Michael Evans claiming that "language teaching and learning, at all levels, can benefit from the mediation of technology" (Evans, 2009, p. 28). It is their overall viewpoint that new technologies are of vital importance for the EFL classroom.

The Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) approach is a commonly used approach in EFL learning: It concentrates on the *content* and the *meaning* rather than the production of the correct linguistic outcome (Hall, 2011, p. 96) and can be adapted according to the need of the learner and the curriculum. This encouragement of spontaneous language usage enables students to move out of their comfort zone and is therefore considered good preparation for real-world experiences (Willis, 1996). By language acquisition through meaningful content, learning and training becomes more effective: Students retain knowledge from the game longer than by finishing imposed exercises (Nunan, 2004). Thus, the motivation of completing a game and cooperating with natives or foreigners promotes both learning and

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