Chapter 15
Avatar Teaching and Learning:
Examining Language Teaching and Learning Practices in Virtual Reality Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the pedagogical potential of immersive social virtual worlds (SVWs) in language teaching and learning. Recognizing the language learning affordances of immersive virtual environments, this research examines a study analyzing 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 chapter concludes with a summary of pedagogical insights to inform the use of these hyper-immersive environments in language teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Three-dimensional (3-D) virtual and augmented reality media are increasingly being recognized as ideal environments for second/additional language teaching and learning. Virtual world[1] (VW) learning platforms that began with Active Worlds, Second Life (SL) and Open Wonderland have evolved 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 and immersive dimension into language teaching practices (Buckley & Perez, 2019; Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009; Lin & Lan, 2015; Loke, 2015; Panichi, 2015; Scrivner, Madewell; Wang, 2017). These emerging environments 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; Lin & Lan, 2015; Shrestha & Harrison, 2019).

Second Life (SL) was launched in 2003 and quickly became one of the most prominent and accessible 3-D multi-user social virtual world (SVW) environments used in education (Wang, 2017). Research on SL focused on suggesting ways to use this platform in education (Hismanoglu, 2012), analyzing the environment and its language learning potential (Panichi, 2015). However, many teachers remain unclear how to integrate these dynamic platforms into their language learning environments.

The field of language instruction has been slow to embrace immersive technologies in teaching practices as "there is still not a clear vision of how to integrate these technologies in a stable way into an educational process" (Martin-Gutierrez et al., 2017, as cited in Scrivner et al., 2019, p. 56). Although the use of these environments tend to be increasingly seen as promising for language learning, there remains a dearth of research examining teacher perspectives on the potential, relevance and approaches needed in 3-D VW language education (Lin & Lan, 2015). There is minimal research documenting task design and pedagogical approaches relevant for language teaching/learning in SVWs. In addition, little if any research has examined VW teaching practices through the eyes of an experienced avatar language learner and teacher.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide pedagogical insights into the potential uses of SVWs in language teaching and learning. This chapter will revisit and update an article reporting on a unique study examining the beliefs and practices of an avatar learner and teacher with extensive plurilingual experiences in SL (Lawrence & Ahmed, 2018), a teacher who immersed herself within these environments in varied teaching and learning roles using a range of languages over a 10-year period. Findings will be shared from this study that examined interviews with 'Karelia Kondor', who learned Italian as an adult, taught French to secondary students and designed a range of virtual world curricula. She designed and facilitated telecollaborative German language game-based exchanges and participated extensively in educational communities of practice, all within SL. The study examined the following question: What experiences and pedagogical insights inform language teaching and learning practices within these online immersive environments?

This chapter offers perspectives on hyper-immersive SVWs, their benefits, limitations and the pedagogical potential to inform language teaching within these platforms. The chapter will begin with a definition of SVWs, outlining the affordances and limitations of these environments. The relevance of sociocultural theories to inform SVW use and this study will then be examined, 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 and language teaching practices and

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