IMPLEMENTING SECOND LIFE IN EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Computers have been used quite widely for educational purposes. There are many software and websites designed to help teaching and learning process. As a ‘newcomer’ in the virtual world, Second Life (SL) has been used for different purposes, including education and language learning. In this article, I will describe present uses of SL in education. I will also discuss the challenges and advantages in using SL in education. Finally, I will recommend briefly the use of SL to aid language learning.

Keywords: Second Life, Education, Language Learning, CALL

INTRODUCTION

The use of computers in education has been practised for quite a long time. Dunkel (1991, p. 5) states that computer use in education, particularly in language learning, has been increasing quite significantly since 1980s. She also explains that since then, research has been done to increase the quantity, quality, and also the effectiveness of computer-assisted language learning. Furthermore, Barr (2004, p. 29) mentions that there has been software developed to assist with different kinds of studies/education. It is widely known that technology never ceases to develop. Together with the advancement of technology, more software, websites, and programs are available and developed to help teaching and learning processes in different areas of study.

Radford and Connaway (2007, pp. 31-39) explain that the new generation students (especially ages 12-18) are computer and technology users, students communicate electronically. They even use the term

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“screenagers” (Radford & Connaway, 2007, p. 31) for students at these ages. They explain that “these groups have revealed that they use instant messaging (IM) for socializing and collaborative homework…” (Radford & Connaway, 2007, p. 31). This article has shown us that technology has changed people’s (especially ‘screenagers’) daily lives and education in quite a significant way. This has shown us the wide and common use of computers, the Internet, and also technology in today’s world.

Currently, a new online virtual society has been introduced, called “Second Life” (SL). SL is a “3D virtual world…” (Conklin, 2007, p. 2) that is quite current and relatively new. Several people have also used SL for educational purposes. Particularly interested in this issue this article is going to describe current utilization of SL in education discussing the challenges and advantages of the use of SL in education as well as some recommendations for using SL in language learning classes.

SECOND LIFE

SL is a “3D virtual world created by Linden Lab in 2003” (Conklin, 2007, p. 2). According to Linden Lab to Open Source Second Life Software Creator of Leading 3d Virtual World Releases Source Code to Viewer Software (2007) The “residents” (the term used for addressing the subscribers of SL) are able to “control their in-world avatars, interact with each other via Instant Message, create content, buy and sell objects, access multimedia content and navigate around the virtual environment”. Because people can be creative in using and developing their SL online society, they find that it can also be used for many purposes other than entertainment. According to Wikipedia (2007), SL can also be used for “communication and transport, economy and real estate, business and organization, and also education”.

PRESENT USE OF SL IN EDUCATION

SL uses are still quite recent in education. However, some people have already been using it for different educational purposes with different specifications as well. It is interesting to know that people can be very creative in developing SL to educate the ‘residents’ or visitors. The following are some initially promoted uses of SL in education that can be categorized as successful. The first example is “The International Spaceflight Museum” which is a “virtual museum” founded by Gearsaw Stonecutter and Kat Lemieux (Cochrane, 2006, p. 2). This well-responded museum is
"a real museum, with educational goals and high standards of building and scholarship, that happens to exist only within the virtual world of Second Life" (Cochrane, 2006, p. 2). Another example of the use of SL in the educational field was done by Chang Liu (2006, pp. 6-10) at the Ohio University. Liu (2006, p. 6) realized the potential of SL in teaching and learning and then looked for several interested faculty members who have different areas of expertise. They met virtually "once every two or three weeks" (Liu, 2006, p. 6) and also scheduled some "physical face-to-face meetings" (Liu, 2006, p. 6) to evaluate their progress and find ideas to use SL in teaching and research. As a result, she has won a grant to develop the project. Besides these two, there are more examples of the use of SL in education. Some of them are "an educational island inside Second Life for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Earth System Research Laboratory (ESRL)" (Hackathorn, 2006, p. 12) that intend to "inform the public about how weather, climate change, and human disturbance affect our world" (Hackathorn, 2006, p. 12), "an interactive science museum" (Doherty, Rothfarb, & Barker, 2006, p. 19), and also the use of SL for "multidisciplinary experiential education project" (Mason & Moutahir, 2006, p. 30).

**CHALLENGES OF THE USE OF SL**

As a newcomer, SL still has some limitations that may hinder teaching and learning processes. We will find that they are actually typical problems in using any kind of technology. The challenges may come from the program itself and from the users as well. Liu (2006, p. 7) mentions that "Computer upgrades for faculty members, 'Black Wednesdays' and unscheduled downtime, updating Second Life in students labs, and getting started in Second Life" are some of the technical problems in using SL. In addition to Liu (2006, pp. 6-10), Kemp and Livingstone (2006, p. 14) states some more weaknesses of the use of SL in education. The first one is that it may change the relationship (especially related to the distance) between students and teachers. This is because by using SL, they can actually ‘meet’ right away (Dede, in Kemp and Livingstone, 2006, p. 14). Second, although text and images can be used together in SL, it is relatively difficult to transfer "documents between SL and desktop OS..." (Kemp & Livingstone, 2006, p. 14). Moreover, in some countries, problems like not having proper internet connection and a good computer may also become hindrances (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25).
As for the challenges that come from the users of SL, Liu (2006, p. 7) mentions that “the ‘It’s just a game’ mentality” is one of them. Therefore, Liu (2006, pp. 7-8) finds that some people think SL as unsuitable for educational purposes. Another problem, as Liu (2006, p. 8) states, is that users may not be too experienced in playing computer games. So, they may find SL rather frustrating to learn.

Challenges that occur when using SL are definitely inevitable. Implementing SL, especially starting using it, can be hard work. To have a computer lab can be optional but, as mentioned by Liu (2006, p. 7-8), to have a good computer (with good graphic card and memory) and with a good internet connection (that has sufficient broadband) is very important. Liu (2006, p. 8) also mentions that setting up and updating SL create other problems. This is completely true when computer labs in campuses are to be used. Non-administrator users are not able to install and update the special system needed to use SL. In this case, it is impossible for students to use SL. Scheduled and unscheduled downtimes (Liu, 2006, p. 7) – from the SL itself or probably from where people are using SL – are also nuisances. Conklin (2007, p. 4) explains that SL “would schedule some maintenance downtime during class periods...”. Although SL inform the users (Conklin, 2007, p. 4), this is still a problem. Teachers usually schedule activities for the whole semester from the very beginning. Downtimes will most likely disturb the well scheduled classes. Downtimes caused by the internet connection provider or because of (power) blackouts are some more common problems when computers and internet connection are involved in teaching and learning processes. Besides the technical problems mentioned above, challenges from SL users can create inconveniences as well. “The ‘It’s just a game’ mentality” (Liu, 2006, p. 7) makes people think that SL cannot be seriously used for education. The problem is that to change somebody’s point of view is not easy. Therefore, there may be difficulty in convincing people that SL is useful in education. As for people who are not used to playing computer games (Liu, 2006, p. 8) or not too computer literate, it is true that learning using SL can be frustrating and time consuming.

Other problems relate to the users of SL are related to the ‘who’s behind the screen’ issue and about the concern of violence or other indecent virtual pictures. In using SL, that teachers will most likely have problems in identifying the real person controlling the avatar. This is because it is quite easy for a student to ask somebody to replace them just by telling this person the user name and password. This can be quite frustrating for teachers because they have worked hard to make the teaching-learning process interesting but sometimes students are not responding well to this. Indecent
pictures are also challenges in SL. Teachers cannot control every activity that students do. Because SL is interactive, and quite free, student avatars can virtually ‘kill’ one another in SL or do other inappropriate things online.

ADVANTAGES OF THE USE OF SL IN EDUCATION

Although there are quite a lot of problems in using SL, some researchers find that SL still has the potential to be used in the educational field. Cochrane (2006, pp. 2), for instance, discovers that the virtual spaceflight museum is of much interest of many people. Because of this good response, she and her team plan to expand it further. In addition to Cochrane’s experience, Liu (2006, p. 6) finds that SL is potential for educational research processes. Furthermore, Kemp and Livingstone (2006, p. 13) mention that using SL is more exciting because it is not static – on paper, it is interactive instead. Another advantage that they mention is the “SL platform is completely free of a publisher-imposed narrative” (Kemp & Livingstone, 2006, p. 13), which means that nobody arranges the ‘story’ of the game. As a result, teachers are free to set up their own settings that are suitable for their own educational purposes. Furthermore, Kemp and Livingstone (2006, p. 13) mention about the simplicity of the tools and menus used for “modifying or ‘modding’ content”. As from an experiment done in Morocco about students’ perspective of the use of SL, the overall result shows that “students found Second Life to be fun, exciting, and easily accessible” (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25). This is probably because SL promotes collaborative learning (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25), in which students can work and learn together and from each other as a team. Students are also able to “work from different access point at the same time” (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25) instead of being inside a particular room and meet physically. Also, because there is no written and exact instruction in SL, students will be excited to find out the rule and feel very satisfied when they finally discover it (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25).

The researches and experiments that have been done in implementing SL in education have actually shown that SL is so flexible that people can create virtual worlds that suit their needs. The “International Spaceflight Museum” (Cochrane, 2006, p. 2) and the experiment done by Liu (2006, pp. 6-10) are completely different implementations of SL in education. They use SL in different ways and different purposes but both have accomplished good results. Using SL also gives flexibility related to the meeting place (Bedford et al., 2006, p. 25). As long as there is a scheduled time, students and teachers can access SL from home, campus, a café, or
any place that has sufficient computers and internet connections. Another benefit that SL offer is that it can promote group work between the ‘residents’ (Bedford et al., 2006, pp. 25). Furthermore, SL is not static (Kemp & Livingstone, 2006, p. 13). The learning is done interactively and they are exposed to colorful three dimensional moving picture. To add to the fun, students have the freedom to be creative by creating their desired avatar and there are usually missions to be accomplished by accessing this SL group.

To solve the ‘who’s behind the screen’ issue is obviously difficult but it is also not appropriate not to trust students. It is true that there are dishonest students. However, as a consequence, they will not learn anything anyway – they will not reap the learning reward. As for the indecent pictures, teacher may take the control by giving clear activity to do in a specified time. Hopefully, by doing this, students will not have too much free time to do whatever things they want. For students below 18 years old, SL actually provide a special “Teen Second Life”, an virtual world for teens that “provide a safe online environment” (http://secondlife.com/, 2007).

SECOND LIFE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Haenen, Schrijnemakers, & Stufkens, 2003, p. 246) states that “Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers.” Egan and Gadjamaschko (2003, p. 85) also mention that “The alternative conception Vygotsky offers is to see the mind as being a psychosocial and cultural organ, and the cognitive tools we learn as providing the educator with a focus of attention that can make better sense of the task before us.”

These two statements show us that to learn, people need other people, and learning is done through interaction with others. The same thing is true especially with language learning because nobody can learn a language without using it with other people. This is what SL can do to aid language learning. By using SL, students are able to interact, to ‘speak’ online with other students in the SL community. SL provides the opportunity to use language for real communication in ‘real’ situations. This is different from make-up-situations set by teachers in classroom. Using SL, students can also cooperate with other peers to do an assigned work.

Clearly, SL cannot be used to replace the whole teaching and learning processes in school or other educational institutions, especially with the ‘who’s behind the screen’ concern. However, this does not mean that SL
cannot be used in language learning classes. SL can still be used as an alternative or variation in classes.

A question may arise on students' use of their first language online because all their friends use the first language as well. One idea of the use of SL for language learning is by creating a Multilanguage community. Teachers can, for example, find other teachers from other countries and make a virtual world together. Therefore, students can interact with students from other parts of the world and they have no choice than communicating using the target language learned. Because there is sometimes time difference between countries, meetings using SL can be done outside scheduled weekly classes that are quite convenient for everybody.

**CONCLUSION**

SL has begun to be used in education. Several uses of SL in education include virtual museums, interactive virtual educational projects, and researches. Unfortunately, as something relatively new, there are still challenges in implementing SL. Most of them are technical limitations that make SL looks impossible to do and some are problems from the users. Despite of the challenges and limitations, SL is still worthwhile to do. This is because there are quite a lot of advantages in using SL in education. It is flexible to the need of the users, easy to access, interactive, fun, can promote teamwork, and also there is a room to be creative. It is true that hard work and dedication is needed to make SL successful. For example, when starting SL system in a computer lab, probably the teachers or technicians need to install the computers one by one. Still, this is possible to do. For the downtimes, teachers should always have a backup plan for every meeting (Conklin, 2007, p. 4). It is probably rather difficult to get funding to upgrade computers. Nevertheless making a convincing proposal is a good start. To look for grants, like Liu's experience (2006, p. 9) is also another alternative.

SL can also be used for learning a language. This is possible because students will have the opportunity to interact in 'real' situations with 'real' needs to communicate. SL can provide the environment needed for learning. This is particularly important to motivate the 'screenagers' generations to learn. They will learn a language while having fun and being creative. Finally, implementing SL in a large scope at the beginning will be probably difficult. However, there is no reason for not trying from a small scope, for example a small class consisting of 20 students. Then hopefully in the future, it will enlarge and more people are able to learn using SL.
REFERENCES


