

## Examining Second Life's Virtual Learning Platform to Develop English Language Skills Competency: Opportunities and Challenges

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**Abstract:** Within the related language teaching and learning, various terms have been assigned to Virtual Worlds and similar environments. One of these terms is Second Life. Learning English for EFL learners have been always challenging task. Second Life is a phenomenon raising interest many educators around the world, with many educational and institutions experimenting and offering classes in Second Life for enhancing their students language skills due to its immersive and interactive environment. Its interactive interfaces provide students with realistic experiences and simulated everyday situation in 3D virtual worlds for more authentic and physical practice, students' awareness of the target culture, knowledge construction and learning. On the other hand, its drawbacks can be categorized as financial, technical and user-related once. This paper offers a broad vision of potential benefits and challenges associated with using Second Life as educational tool develop students' language learning. It provides a definition of Second Life as well as demonstrates the affordances that Second Life offers for language learning.

**Key words:** second life, English as a foreign language, virtual worlds, computer assisted language learning CALL

### 1. Introduction

Like other setting, English stands as a foreign language taught as compulsory subject at EFL students. Learning English has always been a great challenge for EFL students (Al Hosni, 2014). Enhancing EFL students' language learning is issue of paramount concern due to the contact hours in traditional learning is not sufficient to assist students to improve their language skills (Soliman, 2014). Recent developments in technology and communication have been playing a crucial role in facilitating and enhancing the effectiveness of language learning process. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) requires applying the principles of computer-assisted language learning to language learning context. It is used of computer programs to improve

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learning. The research area of CALL has changed from consider the computer as a tool to consider it as a virtual learning environment where learners can collaborate and interact with other learners and native speakers (Hamidi, Montazeri, Razavi, & Aziznejed, 2014).

Moreover, Esteves, Fonseca, Morgado, & Martins (2011) state that new digital technology creates and changes the learning and teaching method by bringing new opportunities to the education activities. Furthermore, Virtual reality is a combination of Virtual World and reality to create a simulated dynamic process which allows multiple users to learn and interact with each other in computer-simulated environment. Currently, Second Life is the most common multiuser virtual platform that has been used for these purposes.

Since Linden Lab released "Campus: Second Life" in 2003, many educational institutions and universities have built or rent their own virtual land in Second Life to provide students opportunity to practice and improve their language skills such as Harvard, Princeton, Drexel, Ball State, Stanford, Ohio, and Bowling Green State (Hismanoglu, 2012).

The incorporation of virtual reality technology with Second Life into language learning curriculum not only offers real-life like audio-visual simulations, but also integrates both the virtual and real-life learning environments in order to promote interaction, encouraging learners' interests and learning competence (Chung, 2012). In other words, the learning in virtual environment provides learners with a sense of being there, a new avenue towards successful learning target language. It offers a meaningful opportunity to learn and practice language through interaction with native speakers and other learners. This paper view of literature focuses on Second Life and is intended to describe its enormous prospect, benefits and challenges in the teaching and learning of English language in EFL classroom. Then, it summarizes opportunities and drawbacks of the SL for consideration in education.

## **2. What is Second Life?**

Most definitions about the Three-Dimensions Virtual World state that it is a computer-based simulated environment for large numbers of users. Dickey (2005) defined Virtual world as a computer-based online simulated environment in which users can move and interact with each other by tools of integrated voice chat, text chat, group chat and other way of communication. Furthermore, Bell (2008, p. 2) stated that a virtual world as "synchronous, persisted network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by network computers".

In literature, Achieving common objectives such as interactively, engagements, collaboration, and idea generation have been an ongoing challenge in the field of education. One particular technology that provides unique learning and teaching opportunities to achieve these objectives is 3D virtual world which offers common space for users to interact and create an environment that is convenient for their needs (Eschenbrenner, Nah, & Siau, 2008).

Second Life (SL) is the most popular example of the last generation of 3D virtual world. SL is defined as an online synchronous three-dimensional virtual world (also referred to as a Multi-Users Virtual Environment, or MUVE), has been developed by a San Francisco based Linden Lab, and was launched in 2003 to be available on the Internet, which invites users within the following statements "Enter a world with infinite possibilities and live a life without boundaries, guided only by your imagination" Linden Research, Inc., 2012 (as cited in Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, Campbell, 2015, p. 92). Linden Lab has generated Second Life platform filled with the objects, adventures and experiences of the individuals using Second Life. People enter SL for various

purposes including, but not limited to meeting other people, working, educating and being educated and having fun along the way (Hundsberger, 2009).

In this manner, the essential theme into SL is to create users or so-called “residents” through their own representatives — avatars. The avatars, much like in the real world, can do anything buy their own land, build their houses, rent, go to work, go to dance, go to university, got married, and do various other activities on different islands. In other words, SL is a digital presence consists of multitude of islands which can break up, to be bought and sold by avatars. The currency in SL is Linden \$, which an exchange rate of 1 US\$ equal approx.: 260 L\$. Thus, the environment within Second Life is an imitation of reality (Cheng, Zhan, & Tsai, 2010). Regarding to communication, the avatars can communicate with others through traditional text chat or the use of the more recent incorporation of voice chat (Carter & Elseth, 2009; Keskitalo, Pyykko, & Ruokamo, 2011). SL has also been abilities to record actions that took place within SL. In this case, learners have opportunity to assessment and reflect on their personal performance and interactions with others by viewing their own recorded video clips in SL (Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009). Therefore, instructors and researchers have another chance to formulate theirs learners’ proficiency both from the linguistic and social communication perspective.

Furthermore, SL allows students to create a persona (animals, human or something between) and interact with others, who are in the same environment at the same time, and change their appearance includes building their clothing, hair color, dresses within the environment (Inman, Wright, & Hartman, 2010). At the same time, these are not the only things that can be manipulated in SL Audio or video clips, power points presentations can be uploaded into SL and attached to certain objects. Note cards that contain any information that a teacher desires can be attached to any object in Second Life and recaptured with click of the mouse. Additionally, words or phrases can be attached to objects as floating script, so the students would not even need to click on an object to get a written version of its corresponding words (Carter & Elseth, 2009). Therefore, it helps learners to explore the lessons that they have learned, particularly help them to practice situations which may be inflexible in the traditional classroom. Currently, SL is being used by many educational institutions as a way to engaged students in immersive educational environments. This crucial method of teaching in SL is a combination of theory and practice together with distinctiveness of environment (Carter & Elseth, 2009; Hundsberger, 2009).

In short, the interaction of activities using the SL virtual environment platform allows EFL learners to talk in English through personified virtual characters. Hence, it will encourage learning willingness and enhance interactive learning (Chung, 2012). Second Life is very useful tool for language learners due to it gives them unique opportunity to usage their language skills with other learners and native speakers chiefly for learners who have a death opportunity to use, hear, and practice English in real life. However, Contact with native speakers not only allows students to practice oral skills and improve their pronunciation but also provides some cultural awareness (Wang et al., 2009).

### **3. Learner Characteristics**

One of the essential goal of education is to help students build their skills in both their preferred and less preferred of learning (Idrus, 2008). The most crucial factor in learning and teaching in any setting are the learners. Learner characteristics are considered as an important variable to affect students’ learning achievement both for e-learning and traditional classroom (Lim & Kim, 2003). The concept of learners characteristics can be personal, academic, social/emotional and or cognitive in nature that many influence of how and what learners learn as

follow:

- Personal Characteristics often relate to demographic information such as gender, age, language, maturation, social economic statues and cultural background.
- Academic characteristics often relate to education such as learning goal, education type, prior knowledge and educational level.
- Social/emotional characteristics relate to group structure, individual within group, sociability, self-efficacy and mood, etc.
- Cognitive characteristics relate to emotion span, mental procedures, memory, and intellectual skills which determine how the learner perceives, thinks, solves problems, remembers, organizes and represents his/her information in brain.

Furthermore, there are also large characteristics of individuals learners such as slow learners, fast learners, introvert and extrovert, controlling type and people type, scholar and sport- person, liberal and conservative etc. (Idrus, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative to understand these characteristics and the e-learning as delivery platform must be based on learner characteristics before being applied.

Learner characteristics make learning more effective, efficient and enjoyable. A good e-learning system mechanism must be relied on the learner characteristics. Hamada, Rashad & Darwesh (2011) point out that e-learning is the concept which concentrates significantly on the learner characteristics and how to improve the quality of the learning process. In addition to the previously learner characteristics, learning styles is taken into consideration of the learner characteristics according to Hsu (2012) mentioned that the variety of learning style make adaptive e-learning system more sensible.

### **3.1 Learning Style**

A learning style (LS) can be defined as the characteristics, strengths, and performances in the way student receive and process information (Felder & Silverman, 1988). Different students have different learning styles and this occurs in a wide variety of ways includes the type of interaction, the way they approach their individual studies, their perception and attitudes about the nature of knowledge and the role of constructing it (Idrus, 2006). Learners can enhance learning context which fit with the preference of specific learning style.

Because of the technology development, various educational researches have emphasis on integrate technology into classroom in order to reshape the teaching and learning environments. When utilizing technology as a pedagogical tool, teachers should understand the learner characteristics and LS of their students and how they impact their academic achievement (Brahmakasikara, 2013).

In review literature, there are many LS models such as the LS model of Kolb, Honey and Mumford, and Felder and Silverman (Hamada, Rashad & Darwesh, 2011). Kolb (1985) constructed the learning process into two perspectives and four dimensions. The first one is apprehension perspective which comprises the directions of Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) according of the consideration of experience acquisition. Secondly is transformation perspective which comprises the directions of Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) according to experience transformation. In the light of CE-AC and RO-AE, learning style is classified into four quadrants which are Accommodator, Assimilator, Converger and Diverger (Kolb, 1985) as shown in Figure 1.

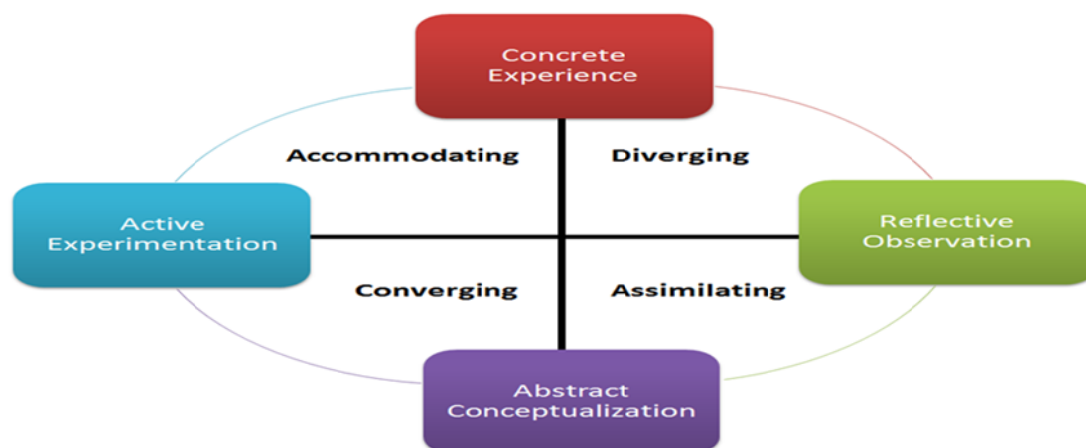


Figure 1 Kolb's Learning Style Quadrant

The advantage of e-learning system will not be maximized unless engaging with students' learning styles. According to Papanikolaou et al. (2006) stated that LS should be taken into consideration when design e-learning environment in order to enhance learning motivation and performance. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between e-learning approaches and learning styles. In brief, LS is an important learner characteristic to be considered in Second Life as e-learning platform. It plays a crucial role to improve learning efficacy. LS are important that learners receive education in areas convenient for their learning styles.

#### 4. Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Second Life

Many researchers have mentioned that the communication with other learners or native speakers of target language has been recognized as essential part of the learning process (Ellis, 1999). The advantage of conversation in authentic situations is invaluable to language learners (Krashen, 2003). In this context, the most successful way to learn second or foreign language is to participate in a community in which the target language is used to communicate in a real environment (Ibanez et al., 2011). Second Life can be utilizing to make the learning more interesting and attractive with the purpose of improving of foreign language learning due to its immersive and interactive environment. According to (Hismanoglu, 2012) maintain that Second Life is very useful tool for foreign language learners due to it gives them unique opportunity to practice language with native speakers and non-native speakers of English for all over the world.

Educators and researchers believe that creating social and authentic interactions could enhance language production, promote communication and assist foreign language learning. Therefore, constructivist approach identifies that knowledge is built by students rather than conveyed and that argumentation encourages negotiation and collaboration among learners (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, a constructivism theory proposes the idea that learning occurs through interaction in the learning environment. Therefore, meaningful knowledge is constructed through the physical interaction with the real world (McDonough, 2001).

In this regards, 3D virtual world environment for teaching and learning such as Second Life can support constructivist learning due to allows users to be physically there in the virtual environment where learners can construct their linguistic and cultural knowledge through authentic interaction with native speakers (Cheng et al., 2010). Furthermore, SL offers opportunity for educators who are struggling to find out new ways to supportive

learning in virtual contexts. Its unique attribute enables schools and universities to achieve targeted educational goals, which otherwise would not have been achievable in the physical world (Zhang, 2013). In this regard, USA today reported that more than 300 universities around the world and a large number of colleges or some in cases individual departments have employed SL as an educational tool with some for distance education courses, and some of use by teachers to support existing traditional classes (Henderson, Huang, Grant, Henderson, 2009; Hismanoglu, 2012).

In review of literature, there are some empirical studies that have been tested the effectiveness of teaching foreign languages in Second Life. Hislope (2008) reported the perceived benefits and drawbacks in using Second Life as a virtual reality program in her intermediate Spanish course in 2008 to a classroom supplement for promote contact and conversation with native Spanish speakers. Results of a survey with 20 open-ended questions administered to 15 students showed both positive and negative experiences with learning Spanish in Second Life. Students like interactive, creative, and gaming-like aspects of Second Life. The reported negative experiences with Second Life focused heavily on technical issues and the high learning curve of navigating in Second Life. Regardless of challenges, 13 of 15 students reported that Second Life could help them improve their comprehension of Spanish.

In another study, Wang et al. (2009) explored an international corporative study between a Chinese university and an American university to investigate students' technology readiness for and their perception of using Second Life as a language learning platform, as well as students' perceptions of integrating Second Life into a teaching English as a foreign Language EFL program during two semesters. Sixty one EFL learners in China met weekly within American partners to complete assigned learning tasks. This evaluation research showed that EFL learners positively perceived Second Life as a language learning tool, and they understand the EFL program in Second Life to be successful and interesting as well as valuable learning experience that would not be easily achieved in real life.

## **5. Benefits for Teaching English to EFL Learners in Second Life**

In offering a more opportunities of communication and immersive learning experience for EFL students, Second Life well suited for teaching and learning foreign language due to allows learners to immerse themselves in linguistically appropriate environments to achieve educational objectives (Cheng et al., 2010). Second Life has been presented many benefits to instructors, especially since the launch of voice. In this context, voice in Second Life helps students to talk with one another just like they do in real world environment. In SL now learners can communicate with other learners in a 3D virtual environment regardless of where they are located.

Warburton (2009) and Hismanoglu (2012) mention that the teaching English to EFL learners in Second Life have many benefits is as follow:

- Rich interactions: Second Life has potential to provide opportunities for social interaction among people and their communities, human-object communication and also intelligent interaction among artifacts.
- Contextualization and visualization: It provides users with playing and production and reproduction content, sometimes impossible to see in real world, due to they are distant, costly, made-up or difficult to access.
- It provides learners to recognize and learn about other cultures.
- It makes immersion in 3D virtual World where learners having strong expression of being presence through avatars.
- Simulation: It provides reproduction of context, sometimes hard to produce in the real life, considering them

as advantages for educational purposes.

Many studies have conducted extensive research on anxiety and motivation and their correlation with linguistic performance of learners, emphasizing the role of anxiety and motivation as determinant factors in foreign language learning (Tahaine & Daana, 2013). The higher motivation and lower anxiety levels students will success to learn new language. Environment plays a crucial role for improving learner motivation and help learners decrease their anxiety levels to a minimum (Liu & Cheny, 2014). In real world, Asian students have suffered from performance anxiety. Socially, it is not adequate to them to make mistakes and they do not like to embarrass themselves in community so they don't like to speak up. In this case, performance anxiety is significantly reduced in Second Life. One of the most prominent features of SL is that users can remain anonymous (Hundsberger, 2009). This is beneficial to some students especially EFL learners sufferer from performance anxiety in real life.

## **6. Challenges for Teaching English to EFL Learners in Second Life**

Although Second Life provides many benefits to aid foreign language learning, it is not without some limitations and challenges. Baker, Wentz, & Woods (2009) point out that some challenges which faced implemented of Second Life for education. Some of these challenges as follows:

- The need for high end technology: Second Life involves more than a simple computer. Requirements of complete system are listed on the SL web site. The computer of many educational institutes might not be able to meet the system requirements. Therefore, SL platform involves specific advance graphic cards and high speed broadband connection.
- Some students might have anxiety about learning to use SL, and do some not enjoy online interaction as well as might not be enough of time needed to become comfortable working while others are willing to try new technologies.
- Overlapping conversations can happen simultaneously which can become confusing among learners. In this case, teachers must to formulate procedures for dealing with group discussion in SL.
- Difficult operation tasks: for some students are able to create an avatar, download the software, and learn most basic operation within an hour, nevertheless, this process will not be easy for some.
- Finally, security matters have be taking into account. Learners want to be informed about appropriate behavior and safeguarding their privacy while communicate in SL.

In addition, Berns, Pardo, & Camacho (2011) point out that we have other part which might make VWs hard to use with foreign language learners due to they might feel confused or even lost in VWs since that VWs are usually open spaces which allow learners to move from one space to another and they can meet, chat and interact with others. In a like manner, some learners are less attractive of VWs because they usually lack the basic language skills which are essential to increase interact with other partners in target language. Whereas, some language learners are strongly attractive due to they try to create a suitable opportunity to practice their language skills with other learners as well as native speaker.

## **7. Conclusion and Future Recommendation**

Teaching and learning English has been always challenging task. Exploiting Second Life in learning and teaching foreign language has showed that the new digital technology has features that could be used to improve

educational practices. Nevertheless, learners are predictable to progress and participate in interactive and engaging educational activities that improve language learning process. Second Life is a unique opportunity for learners. It allows learners to interact with native speakers and other learners as well as can produce new experiences that may difficult to present in the real life. It can foster synchronous interaction with teacher, students and other learners. It can also foster competency based training like vocabulary, skill, and grammar such other computer assisted language learning devices.

As the world progress, we need to use technology and synchronize ourselves with it. The wide activities on Second Life platform needs to be activated in the English language learning to increase the time that students' motivation and interaction with language. Second Life is an essential tool that should be used to supplement tool to the EFL traditional classroom. It includes various activities and realizes the way in which language is used. In contrast, the drawbacks that might be faced by learners and teachers while using SL could categorize as financial, technical, and user-related ones.

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