



Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online

1st Evaluation Report based on an

“AVALON Experts’ Survey”

April 2009



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

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Foreword

First of all, thank you very much for responding to our survey. It was very helpful concerning the preparations of the forthcoming interviews. After all, this survey predominantly serves as a first orientation concerning the tendencies and, of course, what should be asked in the interviews and where we should go into more detail. This is why in most cases the answer possibilities were limited to yes and no.

We sent out surveys to 16 AVALON members and received 11 completed answers – aborted surveys were sorted out.

The survey was split into 6 categories:

- Introduction and Second Life in general
- Teaching experiences
- Language teaching in Second Life
- Pedagogy
- Goals
- Final

Within this report we will split questions and answers into more subcategories in order to have a more detailed overview.

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1 Introduction and Second Life in general

1.1 Introduction

Please introduce yourself shortly in the following passage (professional background, Organisation, research focus)!

Summarized, all respondents have something to do with either eLearning, on line communication, pedagogy, student learning, language learning, or computer sciences/informatics. Respondents have a lot of know-how concerning the technical part, as well as on language learning.

Considering the fact that all respondents do have a background in education, it differs in many ways. This might lead to different unconscious or conscious preconceived conceptions of learning (e.g. required use of blended learning scenarios, objects etc.).

The question concerning the research focus was probably exclusively answered with a view of the project so that not all research interests may have been mentioned. There were also two respondents who didn't give any information concerning their research interests.

As AVALON is a research and development project, it is necessary to collect quantitative as well as qualitative empirical data.

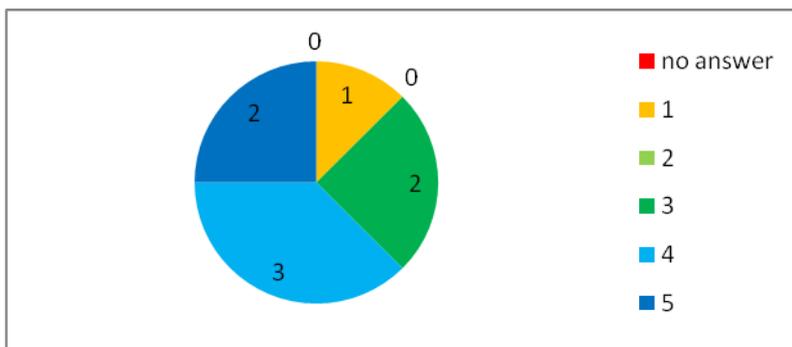
1.2 Second Life in general

1.2.1 Orientation Island

After installing Second Life on your Computer, did you use the Orientation Island?

8 from 11 respondents used the Orientation Island, which the majority regarded as helpful.

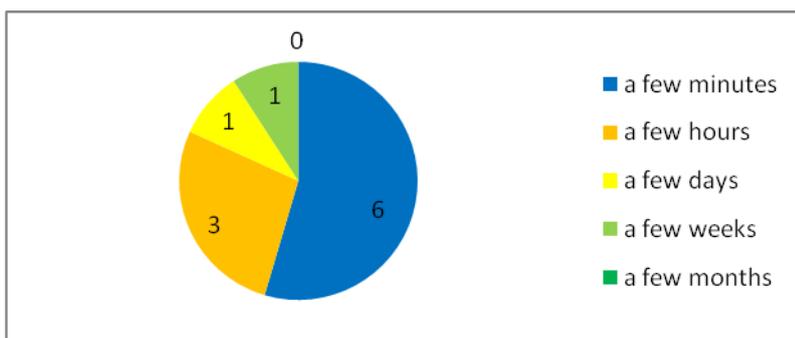
How would you rate the Orientation Island in Second Life on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being "extremely helpful" and 1 being "extremely unhelpful"?



The fact that the majority of the respondents had used the Orientation Island after installing Second Life on their computers and regard it as helpful, shows that it is generally necessary to have a technical introduction phase. Whenever technical tools are used, it is useful to get to know the general basics. In regards to Second Life, this means knowing how to walk, talk, chat, fly with your avatar etc. In this context, the question arises as to whether or not there will be a need of a special additional introduction phase concerning technical requirements which are needed to participate in a language course. This question will be taken up in the forthcoming expert interviews.

1.2.2 Avatar

How much time did you spent on designing your avatar so far?



Designing the Avatars, and thus constructing a certain identity, holds an important value within most of the literature concerning virtual worlds. Referring to the answers in this

survey, it is not a really important value among the experts. At this point there are already some questions in view of the interviews occurring – e.g. “If designing the Avatar is obviously not such an important value among the experts how would they estimate the influence of the teacher Avatars with regard to the learner-teacher relationship? Should they look like the “typical” teachers? Why or why not?”

1.2.3 Duration of using Second Life

For how long do you use Second Life now?

Due to some grammatical misunderstandings this question is not evaluable and will be passed into the interviews.

1.2.4 “Leisure time” in Second Life

Do you use second life for other purposes than teaching?

7 from 11 respondents use Second Life for purposes other than teaching. Instead of using Second Life for teaching related activities such as holding or attending meetings, advising students or doing diverse research, Second Life is used for activities such as: building, designing, learning quests, fun, dancing, travelling, museums, galleries, art, music events, sports etc.

Still most of the expert activities can be regarded as job-related which is also reflected in the answers to the following question.

Do you meet your personal friends in Second Life?

6 from 11 respondents do not meet their personal friends in Second Life. This answer reflects the fact that the respondents mainly use Second Life for job-related purposes and not for private matters. This question had the purpose of getting to know the experts a little bit better and find out how they use Second Life. As well as the question about the research backgrounds of the experts, we considered this question adequate for this first questionnaire.

2 Teaching experiences

2.1 Language teaching in general

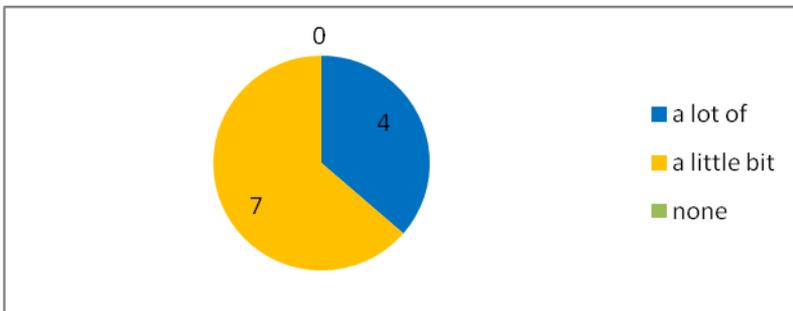
Do you teach languages? For how long?

6 from 11 respondents currently teach languages. But these four persons have been teaching for 14 – 20 years. The odd ones had taught languages in former times or have dealt with language teaching in different/other contexts.

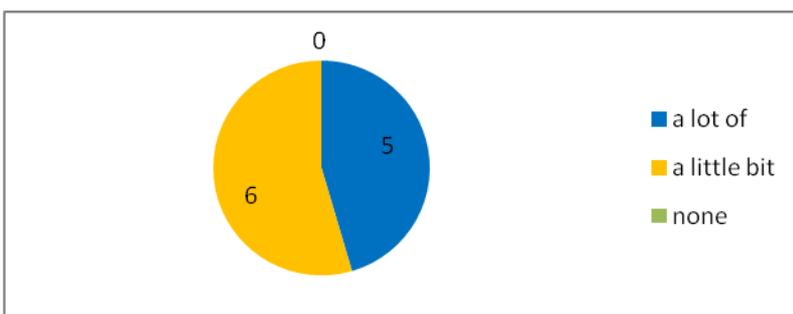
In line with the forthcoming expert interviews we will go into the respective teaching experience of each respondent. This is regarded as important because the individual background and experiences of each respondent might have influence on their views concerning learning and teaching in Second Life.

2.2 Teaching and technical experience with regard to Second Life courses

In your opinion... How much teaching experience does a language teacher already need to teach languages in Second Life?



In your opinion... How much technical knowledge does a teacher need to teach in Second Life?



The majority hold that there is not a lot of teaching and technical experience needed to be able to teach languages in Second Life. Concerning these two questions a correlation was

attempted to be discovered between the answers given by those who have teaching experiences and those who have not. The hypothesis was that those who have teaching experience will give the same answers and so will those who have no teaching experiences. Indeed no relation or unity could be found between the answers given by the two described groups. The most striking result concerning the comparison of the given answers was the extreme variety: e.g. someone who has been teaching languages for about 20 years said that he sees a need of “a lot of” teaching experience and “a little bit” of technical knowledge concerning teaching in Second Life. On the other hand a respondent who has been teaching for about 14 years gave the answers vice versa. This heterogeneity goes through with all given answers. After all, these questions predominantly serve as a first orientation concerning tendencies from the experts. The amount of technical and teaching experience that will actually be needed remains to be seen in praxis.

2.3 Personal teaching experiences in Second Life

Have you already used Second Life for teaching?

5 from 11 respondents have already used Second Life for teaching. This was a purely informative question which will become important again in contexts with other questions. With a view to the forthcoming interviews there will be a division made between those who already have teaching experiences in Second Life and those who have not. Thus differences in views concerning teaching and learning in Second Life could possibly be read out.

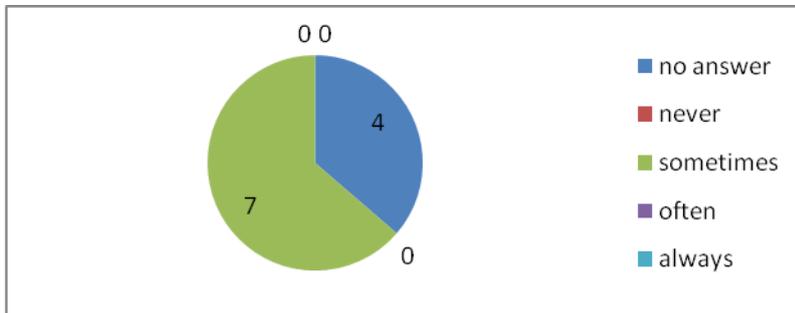
How many seminars/lectures did you held in Second Life so far?

The number of seminars/lectures varies from 4 to 50. Like the previous question, this was also an informative one to find out on how much teaching experience concerning Second Life each respondent can draw upon. This will become interesting again in combination with other questions and in relation to the answers given by those who do not have teaching experiences in Second Life (e.g. “What is the largest possible number of students for a language class?” or “Does teaching in Second Life require a higher workload for teachers than off line teaching?”).

2.4 Technical issues

2.4.1 Occurrence of technical problems

When teaching in Second Life - how often did technical issues keep you from actual teaching?



All of the respondents who teach or have taught in Second Life indicate that technical issues keep or have kept them away from actual teaching *sometimes*. If it can be assumed that technical problems will occur, sometimes the question if there are already any possible solutions for these problems will logically come up. In this context it is also interesting if the experts believe that they will ever be in the position to guarantee an undisturbed course. Or maybe this isn't an issue at all because technical problems can also occur during real life courses?

2.4.2 The problems

What are the most problematic technical issues?

The sound quality was indicated as the most common problem. But also basic problems like going, flying, talking etc. were mentioned. After technical problems as well as problems concerning the handling of the Avatar were mentioned, the question of why then hold on to Second Life as an adequate learning environment comes up. The forthcoming expert interviews will go into detail concerning the question of what the advantages of a 3-D environment with voice- and text-chat functions are compared to other applications providing the possibility of voice- and text-chats.

3 Language teaching in Second Life

3.1 Successful language courses in Second Life

In your opinion... What are the main criteria for a successful language course within Second Life?

The answers to this question varied from one sentence answers to short essays. What is striking is that the answers either refer to emotional or to organizational issues. One respondent regarded “the creation of a feeling of low anxiety and community, e.g. that people get engaged with the group and feel that they dare express themselves” as the main criteria for a successful language course within Second Life. Another respondent, on the other hand, considered “a native English language teacher who has reasonable experience and knowledge of the Second Life environment” as the main criteria.

There were also some answers of more general nature: good pedagogical concept, clear instructions how the session will run, good tutoring and technical knowledge like how to use voice chat and how to move etc.

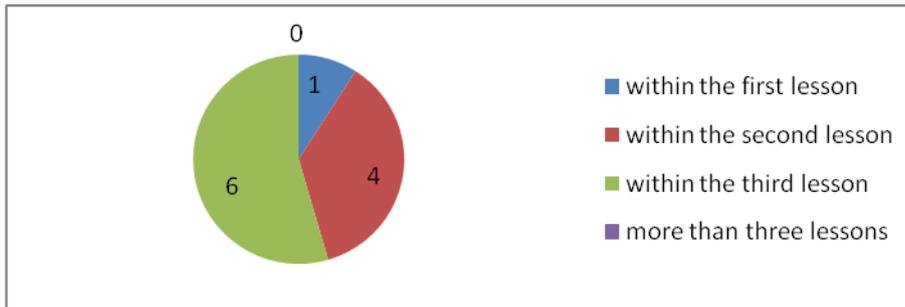
Altogether, it stands out that action-orientation is one of the most mentioned criteria for a successful language course within Second Life. It is not surprising that primarily in language courses, action-orientation is a very important issue. Language wants to be used and the world of Second Life constitutes an appropriate environment for trying out languages practically. So getting students to talk respectively enable students to talk in a foreign language can probably be regarded as the main criteria for a successful course. One respondent underlined his opinion by a quote from one his students: “I have studied English for 20 years, now I would like to use it”.

3.2 Starting issues and involvement

In your opinion... Is there a need of a Second Life introduction before the language course actually starts?

9 from 11 respondents regard a Second Life introduction before the language course actually starts as necessary. In this context there are questions occurring such as “Apart from the applications that are explained in the Orientation Island, what else should be taught during an introduction phase? What else do learners have to know to be sufficiently prepared for a language course?”

In your opinion... How long will it take for a newbie to feel comfortable in a SL classroom?



The majority of the respondents presume that a newbie will not feel comfortable in class until the second respectively the third lesson. In this context it is interesting that respondents who are experienced in teaching in Second Life mainly gave the answer "within the second lesson" whereas non-experienced mainly gave the answer "within the third lesson". As the majority of the respondents declared that it will last about three course units to get a newbie feel comfortable questions like "How can these first units be constructed compared to the following?" occur.

In your opinion... Will the concentration/involvement in a Second Life lesson be higher than in regular classes?

9 from 11 respondents consider the concentration/involvement in a Second Life lesson higher than in regular classes. This question was asked in order to clarify tendencies concerning the concentration and involvement in Second Life classes. Within the forthcoming interviews the experts will of course be asked why they believe this. On the other hand, it is also interesting to look at if the experts assume that a higher concentration/involvement automatically means a good successful class?

Is group work during on line sessions in Second Life possible? Is it technically complex?

All respondents gave the opinion that group work during on line sessions in Second Life is possible and not technically complex. The realisation of group work during on line session doesn't seem to be an issue at all. But even though there are questions occurring like: What has to be considered when starting group work? How much time is needed?

3.3 Organizational concerns and workload

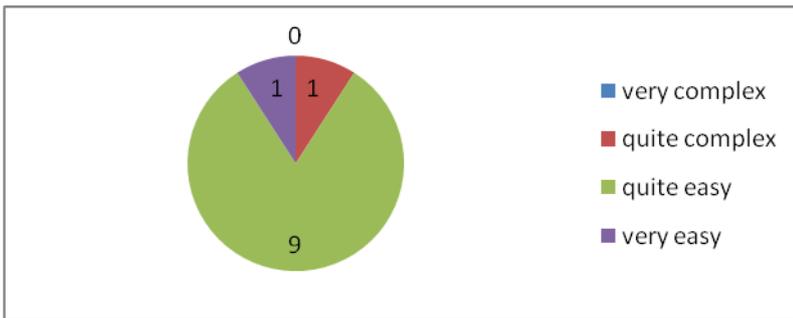
In your opinion... What is the largest possible number of students for a language class?

The answers to this question vary from 6 to 20 students, but altogether average at about 15 students. These numbers show that the largest possible number of students in a Second Life language course cannot be compared to language courses in real life at university for example. It is assumed that at university or language schools, a larger number of participants can be taught at the same time. But on the other hand, a high possible number of students is not important for the quality respectively the outcome of a course – quite the contrary. With regard to the interviews it would be interesting if the experts could think of certain problems that could probably turn up if much more than 15 learners would participate? Are there any certain experienced data? Are the settings kept limited for didactical reasons also or just because for the benefit of a better technical realization?

Does teaching in Second Life require a higher workload for teachers than off line teaching?

7 from 11 respondents don't expect that teaching in Second Life requires a higher workload for teachers than off line teaching. In the context of this question it is important to take a look at who had answered what. Two of the five respondents who have already taught in Second Life see a higher workload coming up for the teachers. The other three who have also teaching experiences in Second Life don't regard the workload as high as it is when teaching off line. In this connection there can be no decision made concerning the question if teaching in Second Life requires a higher workload for teachers than off line teaching or not. But it can be assumed that it is not Second Life as the learning environment as such that requires a higher workload or not but rather that it depends on the teacher individually. Within the interviews there will be taken a closer look at individual ratings.

In your opinion... How complex will it be to bring a student who misses a course back into current class action?



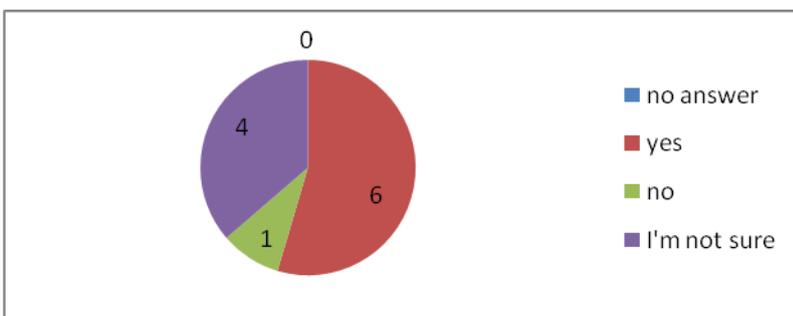
9 from 11 respondents state that it will be quite easy to bring a student who misses a course back into current class action. This subject seems to be not an issue within a Second Life course. But the question occurs how a "bringing back" will be realized concretely.

In your opinion... Will there be a need of setting consequences for students who come late into class?

10 from 11 respondents don't see a need of setting consequences for students who come late into class. This subject seems to be not an issue and there's no need for further investigations. But on the other hand it would be interesting to know why the experts don't seem to believe in consequences for delayed students and what a concrete case could look like.

3.4 Anonymity

Do you regard the anonymity of Second Life as an advantage within the learning process?



6 from 11 respondents regarded the anonymity of Second Life as an advantage within the learning process – 4 people were not sure about the answer and only 1 answered with no. Referring back to the question about the higher involvement in Second Life classes in

combination with the advantage of the anonymity, this is probably where one of the biggest potentials concerning learning and teaching in Second Life can be seen. There are questions occurring such as “In which respect does the anonymity in SL influence the learning process?” and also where the experts see the advantages or disadvantages concretely. 3 from the 5 respondents who have already taught in Second Life stated that they regard the anonymity as an advantage. 2 from the 5 said that they are not sure. This steers to the question why and raises hope for concrete examples of experienced data from the experts.

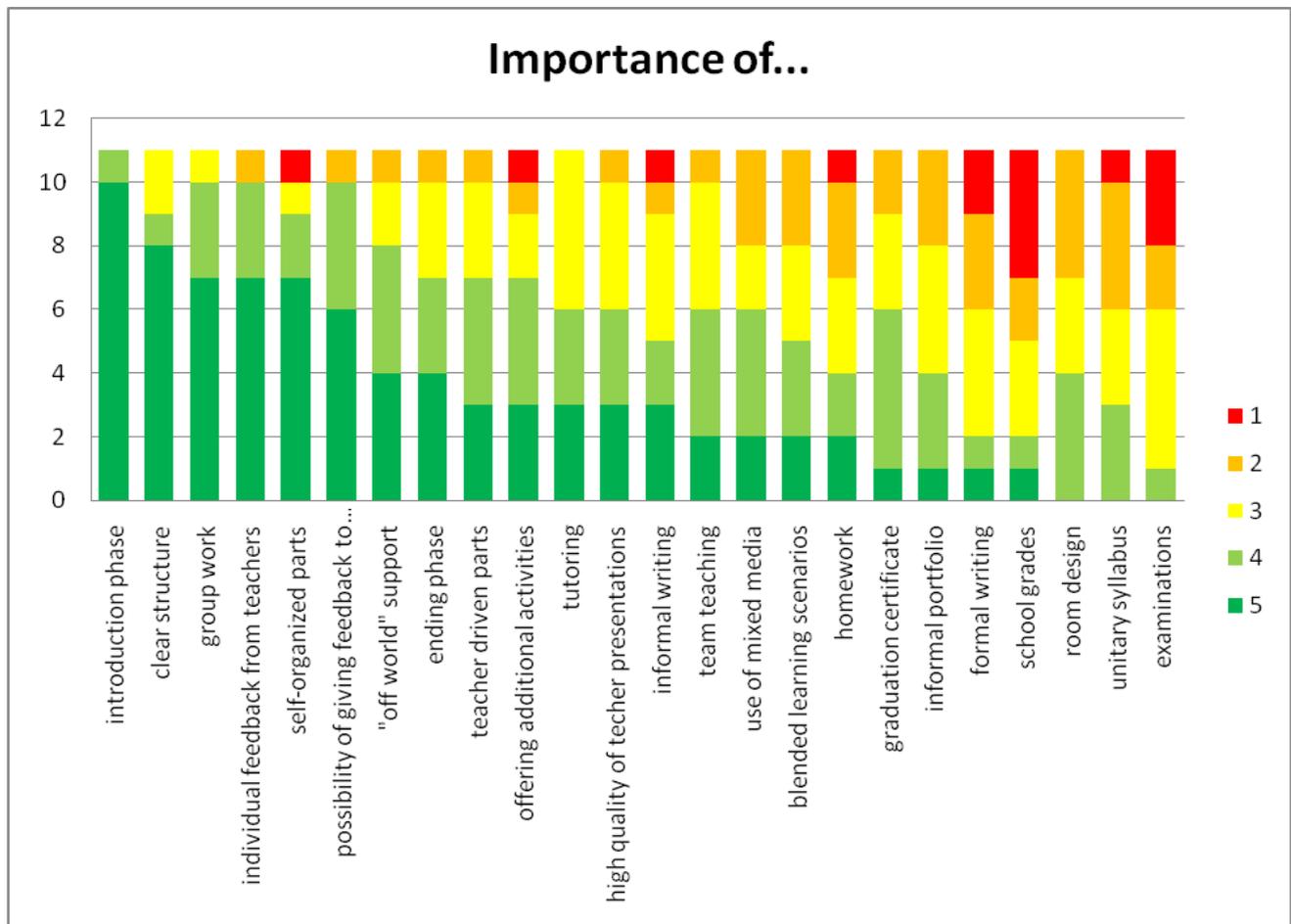
3.5 Reservations

What might students keep away from learning in Second Life?

The answers to this question varied from cultural issues over the desire to see a “real” teacher to not taking the environment seriously. Respondents mentioned general fear of technology as well as skepticism about virtual worlds. In the context of the environment one respondent described that some students may feel that it is a gaming environment, and as such, not suitable for language learning and thus not take it seriously. But altogether technical aspects were mostly mentioned by the respondents, e.g. slow system performance, not having the right kind of technology available, not having an interest in using technology in language learning. By this question it was meant to discover what students might keep away from taking part in a Second Life course in general. But in this context, another question for the forthcoming interviews was generated: What might prevent students from an efficient learning during a Second Life course? And thinking of a virtual teacher, what about mimic and gesture belonging to the certain languages?

4 Pedagogy

In your opinion... How important are the following issues for a successful Second Life course on a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 being "unimportant" and 5 being "very important"?



As an introduction phase and a clear structure came out as the most mentioned very important issues for a successful Second Life course, there will be further investigations needed concerning these points. Can it be assumed that the introduction phase means presenting the structure of the course as well as technical aspects that were not explained within the Orientation Island? What about the forgone assumption that a newbie will need about three lessons to feel comfortable? How will that be considered?

Group work and feedback as well from teacher as for the teachers and self-organized parts were also rated as quite important issues for a successful language course in Second Life. This displays that activity or rather "doing" seems to be essential for a successful course. On the other hand examinations and school grades were rated as most unimportant. What does that imply? How can the "doing" from the learners get evaluated then? Which conceptions do the experts have concerning learning targets and the

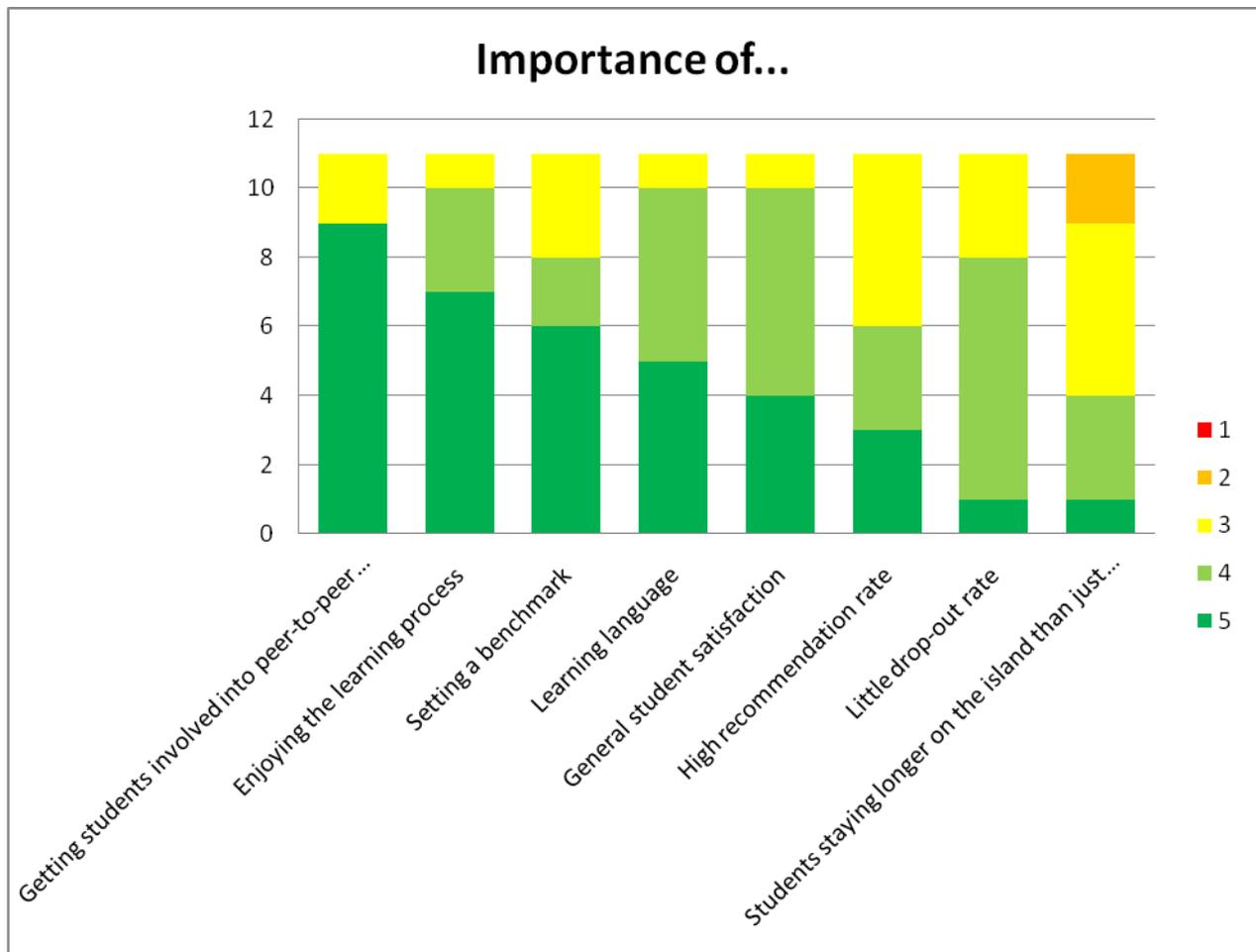
evaluation of those? It might also be very meaningful to ask this question again within the interviews but with the difference that the experts should once think about these issues in connection with Erasmus students as participants and once about Grundtvig students. Where will the differences be?

The room design is also rated as quite unimportant. But why then spend so much time on designing AVALON learning? Or was there a misunderstanding concerning a certain room and the environment in general?

Within the interviews, questions about certain issues mentioned in the survey will be asked about again but not as a scale questions but as open questions (e.g. how important is the design of a learning-environment for you? On which criteria was the Avalon Learning Island created?).

5 Goals

In your opinion... How important are the following goals concerning a language learning course within Second Life on a scale of 1-5, with one being "unimportant" and 5 being "very important"?



The first thing that strikes concerning the rating of goals of a Second Life language course is the fact that “getting students involved into peer-to-peer activities” as well as “enjoying the learning process” got rated much higher than “learning language” as such. There are questions appearing such as: in your opinion, what is more important within an Avalon Learning course: enjoyment or learning the language? Is there a discrepancy between enjoyment and learning? How would you rate the quality of a language course if enjoyment is regarded as important as it was within the survey? As “setting a benchmark for further language courses in Second Life” ranks third, it will be important to get to know why this issue seems to be quite important for the respondents. Within the interviews the question about the goals will also be asked as an open question to see if different goals will be

mentioned (e.g. what kind of goals can be defined for a language course in SL? What will the outcome at the end of a course exactly be?).