



Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online

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Foreword

First of all, we would like to thank the participants from the Business English course that they found the time to do this interview with us. We would also like to say thank you to “Grenzenlos” and Graham Stanley who helped us very much to organise everything. We were in the lucky position of being able to conduct six of the eight interviews face to face in Vienna and thus had the chance to get to know some participants of our Avalon courses personal. That was a really nice and motivating experience. The two other interviews were conducted via skype, which was also very nice and interesting.

On the basis of the participants’ survey¹ and the corresponding evaluation report² a qualitative interview schedule for participants³ was developed and 8 participants from the Business English course were interviewed. These interviews gave a more detailed insight in certain thematic issues which arose during the analysis of the previous participants’ post-course-survey. The interviews evaluate the courses and support or refute certain assumptions concerning quality criteria with respect to language learning in Second Life. This report therefore is addressed to the project partners providing feedback on their work. In addition it serves as a useful orientation for teachers who would like to start teaching in Second Life. This Report summarizes the statements from the interviewees.

The interview was split into five categories:

- General information
- The course
- Learning in Second Life
- Avatars
- Perspective and closing question

¹ <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31646829/Surveys>

² <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33804693/Evaluation-Reports>

³ <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31645196/Interview-guidelines>

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General Information

Language learning background and first experiences in Second Life

The Avalon Language Course constitutes the first online learning course the interviewees have ever taken part in. But the majority had experienced “offline courses” at University, Volkshochschule or other institutions before.

At the same time the Avalon project was the motive to get in touch with Second Life for the first time. Only one interviewed person was already using Second Life for about seven months before the Avalon course started.

When asked about their first steps in Second Life various answers were given: the majority remembered the virtual world as “fascinating”, “interesting” and “huge” when they first entered. Apart from one person the participants all indicated that they had problems dealing with the technique (e.g. microphone, moving the avatar etc.) in Second Life at the beginning as well as with the orientation in general. But the majority also shares the opinion that with the help of the “orientation lesson” and the constant information and advices from the teacher they were soon able to cope with Second Life and the technique.

One interviewed person even explained that her first steps in Second Life felt like a computer game to her and that it was quite funny meeting people and watching them trying to fly or move for example.

Asked about their expectations and motivations for attending a Business English course in Second Life the interviewees agreed upon the “package” of improving the language and at the same time getting to know Second Life. Two of the interviewed persons were concretely interested in getting familiar with the teaching situation in Second Life because they are doing research in this field respectively would also like to use it for teaching sooner or later. Furthermore the participants were curious about what would be possible in Second Life and meeting new people. They also appreciated the chance of hearing and talking English at least once in a week and thus refreshing their (business-) vocabulary and pronunciation.

The course

The second category of the interview deals with the course. The interviewees were asked if there have been any special learning scenarios or tasks that seemed very helpful to their learning progress. Unfortunately most of the participants couldn't remember any special tasks anymore. Below you find some remembered scenarios which were described as helpful from learners:

- Doing job interviews
- Watching videos about how to apply and doing a good / bad interview
- An own business project they had to work out in a group
- Presentation of the projects

It appears that the tasks and scenarios that were remembered and described by the participants all had to do with active communication and practicing the language as well as presenting themselves in business situations.

During the course the participants came in touch with working on their own, doing group-work as well as teacher-led parts. In the interview they were asked which of these scenarios seemed most productive to them. All interviewees agreed on "group-work" as their favorite learning scenario mainly because of the following reasons:

- "[...] because you had to talk more than in the teacher led parts were you could only listen most of the time."
- "Within the group-work there were always discussion parts were everybody had to take part in and talking is one of the most important things to do in a language course"
- "We had to do group-work with changing partners and afterwards there was a discussion with the whole group and the teacher. It was interesting because you talk to people from different cultures and that is a good practice."
- "Group work was more productive because it easier to talk in smaller groups. There were not so many technical problems then."

- “The discussion with the other people was more productive because the most things the teacher told us were about the technical things”.

One interviewee indicated that it was the mixture between the teacher-led part and the working in groups: the group-work was always communicative but sometimes problematic because of missing vocabulary and within the teacher-led parts they got to know new words.

Learning in Second Life – Differences and aspects

During the participants' interviews the respondents were asked to compare learning in Second Life to other learning they have done before and judge the main differences. They were asked *if* it differs from learning a language in other online learning scenarios and if yes, in which aspects. Because the interviewees partly gave very personal answers to this question it was decided to depict them as quotes in this report. Here are a few statements concerning "learning in Second Life":

- "I think the biggest difference is that I have access to different cultures and that I meet people from different cultures and this is very interesting [...] and in your real life you don't have so many chances to meet people from other cultures unless you travel a lot."
- "You have the possibility to always access native speakers if you want – just by teleporting".
- "You can learn from everywhere and you don't have to travel to a school."
- "Second Life is free space. It is a new chance for people to study language and improve it."
- "You have quite a lot of possibilities in Second Life you could use for language learning: in the environment you can create things very easily and put objects how you want it and things like this".
- "I was more motivated to learn English than I was in school."
- "I would say the main difference is that the setting is so special in Second Life that it needs a lot of attention".
- "It was a little bit a pity that we had to care so much for the technical problems that at least half of the lessons went with "can you hear me, can you hear me?"

Please come over!"

- "People are forced to speak to each other and to communicate because of technical problems for example.
- "[...] getting along properly with the technology is the biggest challenge"
- "[...] really interesting for learning because you can have a lot of interesting shortcuts to new words and new things that you would traditionally look up in a dictionary."
- "We did not really have written parts so that's the difference."
- "Sometimes no one gives an answer and there is silence for minutes."
- "The teacher is not starring at you, which is good."
- "I think didn't pay complete attention to the course. When you're sitting at home in front of a computer, working with a computer the whole day, I was really tired in the evening and I was listening but not really concentrating."
- "The representation as an avatar gives you the possibility to not be so involved if you don't want to, but this could be regarded as a negative or positive aspect."
- "The method of learning and teaching was very new and I think at some point it was a little bit problematic for me, because it was very different from the way I was used to do language learning at school or university. It was more a learning by doing process. And sometimes I would have liked to have a little bit more structure or know why things are done in between the course. So at this point maybe I would have liked to get just some structure or to know that there is a plan or something like this."

Avatars

An avatar is the graphical representation of a user that is used in any kind of virtual role playing games. Within SL every user has the possibility to appear through his/her own individual avatar. The specific appearance, the clothes as well as some selected animations are modifiable by each user. The avatar is the visual image that creates engagement. Generally an avatar is not going to make the language learning as such better or worse, but the idea of engagement, communication and overcoming inhibitions plays a distinctive role.

During the participants' interviews the respondents were asked five questions about how acting and learning with an avatar felt like. At first they should describe a special situation or a certain experience they have had with their avatar on the AVALON Learning Island. Half of the interviewed persons described that they remember some problems they have had with the look of their avatar and that this lead to funny situations: one respondent wanted to change the cloths of his avatar but after taking it of he didn't know how to put something on again – so he was running around naked for a while and felt relieved that this happened after and before he had to go to the course. A similar thing happened to another interviewee who has had a bald head under the cap her avatar was wearing. Though she had to go to the course with her bald head she explained that she didn't felt embarrassed at all "because it was just the avatar and not me". One person had funny problems with the ambiguity of her avatars name – so she simply created a new one. All interviewees indicated that it was amusing for them to explore how their avatar works and also watch others how they practice to fly, walk or try to sit down. Furthermore each of the interviewees got lost somewhere for at least one time.

In addition the respondents were asked how talking and acting through an Avatar felt like during the course. Here are a few statements:

- "It felt very natural in a way."
- "At the beginning funny, because there have been people who did not know

how to write or speak.”

- “I was not a fan at the beginning, because it was like a copy of myself is talking, but after a while I tried to be myself.”
- “It felt much closer as if you would meet someone in skype, because you share the same environment and you see it.”
- “Quite okay. It was easier to listen to an avatar, because it was easier to see some kind of a person and not only hearing a voice.”
- “It was fun, e.g. sitting on the table instead of the chair.”
- “Though you just have limited gestures you do stuff and talk about it. There is a lot of interaction that won’t come if you are separated in separate worlds like in “skype” conferences; you are not in the same place. That makes it special like a close feeling and a game-like thing.”

Generally in a virtual world like Second Life it is possible to maintain anonymity so that nobody really knows about your person. This leads to the question if this kind of anonymity is wanted or rather not. Is it necessary to know the person behind the avatar or is it irrelevant for the process of learning a language? So the interviewees were asked if it was more important to stay anonymous behind their avatar or if they felt the desire to let their classmates know who they are in real life or get to know who they are in real life. The given answers varied pretty much:

- “I felt quite good with the anonymity”
- “[...] there are so many people in Second Life and they have different expectations about Second Life and I don’t want to know all strangers and their situation or let them know my real name. But I mean for the colleagues it is okay.”
- “It was interesting to have two “characters”. There is a difference between the avatar you see and the real person behind this avatar.”
- “Anonymity was not an issue because only learning English was important – you don't always stay in contact with the other participants after the course.”

- "I wanted to let the others know who I really am, because I'm a teacher, too. I wanted people to know my website, my blog etc.
- "I knew some people from the course before so it was not an issue."
- "If I would explore Second Life by my own and not as a student in a course, then I would really like the anonymity. Like that it's the opposite of facebook."
- "I liked the anonymity at the beginning, later I sometimes wanted talk with the people in real life."
- "I did not want to stay anonymous, it felt strange to me."

Furthermore the interviewees were asked if and how the usage of an avatar influenced their personal learning situation:

- "When the Avatar didn't do what I wanted him to do then I wasn't really concentrated on what the teacher said. I was more concentrated on how I could stand up again. But when everything worked ok then it did not influence my learning situation very much."
- "No, there was no influence on my learning situation because there was no choice of body language or gestures."
- "I think there was not so much influence on the learning situation because the avatars were just sitting."
- "It was a little bit game-like because of what you could do with the avatar but I did not do much with the avatar during the course and so it did not so much effect my learning situation because the avatar was more like a version of me."
- "I never felt really concerned because no one knows you."

- “For those who are too shy talking in English it's easier to talk through an avatar because there is no direct eye contact.”

Within the last question in this theme complex the interviewees were asked if they think that speaking through an avatar could make it easier to overcome inhibitions as to speak a foreign language. Through the avatar many users feel more freely because it's the avatar that is acting and they are willing to experiment much more than they would in real life. In some cases students who are shy in real life would probably feel more protected in case of making mistakes. On the other hand self-reliant students could feel a little bit alienated and lost in the virtual world because of missing “real” physical contacts. Here are a few statements:

- “Maybe it helps you to concentrate a little bit more on what you are saying when you don't have to look at any persons.”
- “Maybe it is sometimes a little bit more embarrassing when someone watches you directly.”
- “It does not make so much difference if the other person is sympathetic to you or not. The spoken word is more important.”
- “I don't know the situation of others. But for me the first time I talked in Second Life I did feel a bit nervous like in real life. But I've heard from others that for example shy people it helps them to overcome their shyness and speak more freely than in real life.”
- “Generally the fear of talking in another language it not an issue for me – there is no difference at all, compared to an offline course.”
- “Yes, for some people it is more helpful and comfortable talking through an avatar”.
- Maybe it could... because it's a playful environment where you are anonymous and you don't need to talk.”

- "It was an advantage, because no one had to be afraid of his accent or look."
- "Not really. Because you have to press the button before you want to say something. This pressing the button is another barrier."
- "It was sometimes good that the avatar was talking instead of standing in front of the professor in real life, but it was strange hearing myself talking".

Perspective and closing question

In the final part of the interview the respondents were asked a more innovative question: "If you could magically create [or program] some tools or objects or something else in Second Life that would help you learning a language, what would they be?". Here are some of the creative answers:

- "I would create an object that checks the pronunciation"
- "An integrated online dictionary where words can be found quickly"
- "The vocabulary book graham gave us was quite helpful"
- "I think the first idea that comes into my mind is a Tea-House where people can sit together at a fireplace and talk about whatever they wanted to talk about. And there are no fixed topics, we can talk freely and I think through that our language will be improved."
- "Maybe a webcam to have some contact to the real people behind."
- "It would be like a stick or pointer like a magic stick you could point on something and then you would see the name for it."

At the end the interviewees were asked what they take with them from that learning experience in Second Life. The majority shared the opinion they enjoyed trying out something new and got to know Second Life this way. They experienced Second Life as a playful way of learning and a fascinating colorful world. Because all interviewees attended a business English course they thought about certain business related things they learned and came in touch with during the course, for example knowing how to write a business plan in English now. For others it was just the general experience of getting in touch with language learning again and losing their scruple that way.

After the course the majority of the interviewees never visited Second Life again – or at most for one or two times in order to show it to somebody. But apart from one person they would all visited a course like this again in Second Life.