



Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online

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“AVALON Experts’ Interviews”*

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Foreword

First of all, thank you very much for your time and your elaborate answers. It was very interesting for us to conduct the interviews and to compare and discuss the answers afterwards. Furthermore it gave an orientation concerning the preparation of a forthcoming evaluation questionnaire for participants. This will be important to either support or reject certain assumptions in terms of quality criteria for language learning in a 3-D environment like Second Life.

Eight AVALON experts were interviewed via Skype.

The interview was split into four categories:

- General issues
- Technique
- Avatars and learning
- Learning activities / teaching methods

This report displays an abstract of the eight conducted interviews and is therefore written as a continuous text. Within this report the answers are split into more subcategories in order to have a more detailed overview.

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Learning environment

The design of a learning environment in general is very important. Within the “AVALON Learning Island” the main focus was to create informal meeting places which encourage communication between participants who meet online. Because a learning environment should be simple, effective and easy to manoeuvre in, attention was turned to designing an open space which is not clustered with a lot of buildings. A fairly open design is also necessary to provide an easy movement from one place to another. Furthermore it is important to have a sort of interconnectivity between different learning environments and make use of them. The given possibilities should be interesting, appealing and provoke imagination.

A conventional classroom in a sense of a closed delimited room does not really make sense in Second Life, unless people want to shut up sound – it is more relevant to have comfortable places where you can meet and talk.

Very important features are the video screens for example, especially if people want to use power point presentations or if teachers want participants to present their own work.

Learning in Second Life compared to “ordinary” learning

The main statement which can be read out from the interviews is that there is no *perfect* platform for learning a language existing at all. That is why Second Life as a learning environment should not be the only way for someone to learn a language. It depends on what someone wants to achieve: if someone wants to do pronunciation work for example he should probably not use Second Life because the sound qualities are not good enough for that purpose. In general it can be said that anything that would work in ordinary internet courses will work in a Second Life course. Nevertheless there are a big overvalue and a lot of opportunities when it comes to language learning in a 3-D environment such as Second Life. Below a few summarized statements from the experts:

- through Second Life the possibility to experience the language is been given because the students can really use the language
- you can access students from remote locations
- you can learn and practise a language not just by yourself, but together with other non native speakers from all over the world so that you are forced to speak the language
- it enables you to have a distance learning
- compared to other video learning distance platforms, Second Life is free – it is open for everyone.
- people have a lot of flexibility in developing the learning scenarios and it is at low cost.
- it enables you to play around with identity and preconceived ideas of identity
- it is a fascinating and engaging environment because you are controlling it and therefore you feel more involved than you do in 2D environments
- 3D environment supports 3D movement: virtual language travel is possible to

meet local people, socialise with people in pubs, clubs etc.

- it differs from a face to face environment and offers things that are not possible in real life. There are open spaces and you can go to places where people normally do not have the chance to (e.g. you can teleport to London and talk to other native speakers)
- you can act through avatars and hide behind them if necessary – especially when it comes to making mistakes within the learning process and that way you can act more openly in this environment

In conclusion it can be said that the greatest challenge is to find an appropriate way to integrate the advantages of the virtual environments into the real task of education.

What might people keep from participating in a Second Life course?

During the expert interviews the respondents were asked to designate a few reasons why people would probably hesitate to attend a language course in Second Life.

Actually not everybody who wants to participate has access to Second Life (access is blocked) so you have to consider many people all over the world who cannot take part in the virtual environment just for technical reasons. Furthermore many people even don't know that the possibility of a virtual language course exists, they *"don't know what they are missing yet because they have never had this tradition"*.

Another problem is that not every participant has the same actual level of technology understanding so it takes a lot of time to get started in Second Life. With respect to these participants the teacher has to go much more into detail concerning technical application. A computer with low performance and/or a low-bandwidth internet connection could also keep people from participating in a language course in Second Life. Besides if someone doesn't like learning with any kind of computer-based programs he/she won't like this kind of learning environment.

People might not attend a language course in Second Life because it's still regarded to be a computer game and they think gaming and learning a language don't fit together. In addition, students might not take the language course serious enough if it is considered to be just another computer game. Moreover people might not like the idea of avatars: they might not feel comfortable with creating another "personality" in a virtual environment like Second Life because it's not natural in their perspective.

Last but not least it should be mentioned that Second Life occasionally is associated with negative contents, mostly via undifferentiated press releases. Unfortunately this is something Second Life has to deal with.

Technique

In connection with acting and learning in Second Life, technical problems cannot be dismissed. It can be said that the more people attending a course in Second Life, the more likely it is that somebody is going to have a technical problem. Anyway, identifying the largest possible number of participants is not a technical issue at all. It is more an issue of classroom management: if you are trying to do serious language learning respectively language practice it is recommended not to have more than ten or fifteen students in one class.

But technical problems within a 3-D world can actually be seen as a general problem when dealing with computer technology, they are not specific to Second Life. Most of the problems the users have to deal with in Second Life can also occur in average video conference systems. But the reason why they are perceived to be more massive and disturbing within Second Life could be that people feel more responsible for the problems occurring. That is probably because you are represented by an avatar and therefore it is more confusing seeing the avatars around you talking and acting while you are not able to join them because of technical problems with the sound for example. So people are more determined to get the technicalities work than they probably would in other scenarios.

One problem that seems to be a constant issue in Second Life is logistic: everybody has to find the right places and to orient themselves. Moreover it can become quite chaotic when there are too many parallel conversations going on and people are responding too early, too late or even to the wrong person. In this case it is essential that the teacher is aware of these problems and first of all able to manage the difficulties in conversations. Therefore the teacher has to assume the function of an active manager: it has to be part of the teaching process that you have backups so that you are able to reschedule for the case that Second Life might not be working trouble-free sometime. If you have alternatives (e.g. skype or other types of video conference systems) possible technical problems will be no big problem at all. Furthermore long experiences of working with virtual classroom environments showed that students are "problem resilient". People expect to have technical

problems but they are thankful to have a person who helps them going through these technical issues. In addition you should always motivate your students not to give up and find other ways of dealing with certain problems.

All things considered, technical problems do not result from the virtual learning environment itself. Whenever using any kind of technical support, basic technological knowledge and awareness of possible technical problems should be existent – Second Life is no exception. And that is what you have to build into people's expectation in the very beginning.

Avatars

An avatar is the graphical representation of a user that are 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.

Within the expert interviews there was the plan to evaluate the phenomenon of avatars in relation to learning a language in a virtual environment like Second Life. The question which arose was how the fact that you act through the representation of an avatar influences the learning process as well as the interaction between teacher and learner.

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, rapport and communication plays a distinctive role. So what is the difference by having an avatar in a virtual environment compared to avatar-less online learning platforms? This is an aspect which should really be discussed in a subsequent phase of the evaluation process because through the avatar you are actually communicating and have the feeling of doing it somehow with a real person. You can somehow signal you own or any other desired personality through your avatar even if that's not your real personality. It is still real because the user itself created the avatar as an extension of his/her personality. In some way you really have the feeling of actually sitting in the classroom and talking to your comrades.

Look of the avatars

Besides talking about avatars in general it was of special interest to find out what kind of influence the individual look of the avatars (especially the look of the teacher-avatar) has on the communication and interaction between the participants of a course in Second Life. The experts were asked to think about the question if a teacher in Second Life should look like a "typical teacher". After the experts considered that a "typical teacher" does not exist actually, the question occurred if it makes any difference if the virtual teacher looks like an animal for example. In some statements it was argued that one doesn't have to look like a typical teacher as long as the students feel comfortable with that. It is not necessary to dress in a certain

kind of way to be a teacher, it is advisable to use the same sort of strategies that you would use in real life. In some other statements it was pointed out that it is absolutely important to choose the look of the avatar appropriately, otherwise the intention probably won't be taken as seriously by the students. Consequently the teacher should look as neutral as possible and must take the cultural norms into consideration. Altogether the teachers' appearance should be appropriate: probably not too casual and not too conservative. Using the avatar to signal the symbols that a teacher would want to show in a physical classroom would definitely make sense.

Anonymity

Generally in a virtual world such as SL it is possible to maintain anonymity so that nobody really knows about your person. This leads to the question of how to deal with the problem of anonymity. Is it necessary to know the person behind the avatars or is it irrelevant for the process of learning a 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. Anonymity offers the possibility to protect yourself against preconceptions and prejudices about other people.

The students don't have to know the real person behind the teachers' avatar but it is important for the learners knowing at least the professional background of the teacher so they can engage in the learning process.

In conclusion the anonymity in Second Life is very important, because people are often judged by their appearance and therefore it's a great advantage for learners to express themselves freely. But if you want to establish a relationship (e.g. friendship) it is absolutely necessary to know the real person behind the avatar and of course to be honest.

Mimic & gesture

Not having mimic and gesture in Second Life is indeed a problem, because being able to see the lips of the teacher as well as the facial visuals is nearly indispensable

for learning a language.

Cultural differences

Whenever people from different cultural backgrounds come together, cultural differences as well as different learning backgrounds become an issue. But this does not automatically imply problematic scenarios: cultural differences are quite interesting in many ways, particularly when it comes to language learning. Everybody can learn from each other and that does not only imply improving the target language. So dealing with cultural differences can also become a part of the learning process.

On the other hand it can become problematic if people with very different learning experiences are gathering in a virtual Second Life classroom. Nevertheless, in a globalized (language learning) community it is one of the key challenges to accommodate this different learning styles in order to improve the learning process for every student as a whole. Therefore it is essential to establish teaching and learning material that accommodates these different learning styles and furthermore test them on the teaching and learning platform of AVALON. By this means helpful insights in this very complex part of virtual learning might be achieved.

The specificity in Second Life is that people come in as avatars, but they all come in with their own kinds of culture: people who come from a digital culture might behave differently to people who are coming in without a digital cultural background. This does not only matter for the digital culture but for the living culture as such of course: also in a new environment like Second Life you cannot completely leave your own culture behind but maybe acting through an avatar allows some people to be freer and not so bound by their cultural traditions.

Orientation phase

Another issue that needs to be discussed is the orientation phase. The question here is how to introduce the participants into the virtual environment of SL.

Through the analysis of the expert interviews the importance of the orientation phase should be evaluated. The outcome of the expert interviews concerning this issue is as follows:

Generally an orientation phase is necessary for all participants, especially for beginners of a language course. The orientation phase should be undertaken in the mother tongue. A basic introduction is important for everybody to learn the main technical options like teleporting, finding and inviting friends and sending them note cards, using instant messaging and voice chat. An initial orientation is important and gives the students a sense of security which is important for the further learning process.

Apart from the technical issues that should be clarified it is recommended to give students an introduction into the guidelines of the language course. Within the language course a sort of “pre-session” would be important to create a “calming ground” so that everybody feels comfortable and knows what he/she is expected to do. The participants should become acquainted with the learning goals, the evaluation method that is going to be used, the exact time plan and how to get the learning materials.

In summary an orientation phase is important to involve the students into the virtual environment and to show them the technical aspects so that they are not too overextended when the real course starts later.

During a phase with introductory character course-specific topics like guidelines, assessment, goals etc. need to be discussed. This avoids that it comes to misunderstandings in the further learning process.

Praxis, certain tasks and missed lessons

Just like in face to face scenarios people need intensive support to guide them through a learning process. That also means the possibility to be able to contact the person responsible (e.g. teacher, administrator, etc.) as well as people from the course. Therefore it is advisable to establish e-mail lists very early and keep the e-mail communication going before and after each course meeting. Particularly in Second Life people need multiple options concerning communication and support, because the 3-D environment can be a bit confusing in the beginning. In order to be able to provide a certain structure it is very important to have a sort of a “home base” (e.g. moodle, homepage etc.): participants should know what is happening and what will be expected from them.

With regard to people who missed certain lessons from a Second Life course it is the same handling as in real life: they have to either find out from the teacher or from their peers what they have missed and hopefully can act within the next lecture period just as the other students. Compared to face to face lessons, in Second Life the possibility of listening to records or taking a look at text charts from the forgone learning unit is given. There will be possibilities for the learners to get access to written learning material (e.g. word or PDF) or just look up certain things about the course in a WIKI. What the provided learning materials will exactly look like cannot be said because basically learning materials will be dictated by each course itself.

But tasks like the following are imaginable for example:

- tell participants to read something in the newspapers for homework and in the next course session talk about what they have read in small groups
- give participants a common interactivity where they can take turns in doing something – the others can watch and also learn from each ones experience
- tell participants to search a favourite place in SL and afterwards teleport everybody there and explain why you like this place so much and show the others around

- let Erasmus-Students build projects together (for example building up a certain “machine” together with engineer students and thus improve the respective language)
- Indicate directions (e.g. “go straight”, “turn right” etc.)
- Let the students take photos of different places and describe them afterwards
- Send participants to a pub or restaurant and let them order a drink/meal or buy something in a store

Motivation

In general the problem with any sort of learning environments is that the motivation of the learners is very high at the beginning and stagnates afterwards. It is a typical phenomenon that after a very high learning curve at the beginning it just falls down in the middle of the course. By creating a new learning environment the teacher has to think of arrangements to work against this problem.

Concerning motivation the conclusion out of the interviews is that the motivation actually increases within the progress and doesn't stagnate after a few courses. To maintain motivation it is very important to create a community where you can share your experiences and of course create interpersonal relationships. Any kind of a learning environment has to be created in a way that people want to meet their buddies again so that the motivation retains. You have to have a reason to go back into SL. People who have a specific purpose for going into SL will have a high motivation from the beginning and will come back for more.

Some other possibilities for keeping the learners' motivation: to arrange little tests, tutorials and to retain a constant dialogue between the teacher and the students.

In summary we found out that there is no consistent recipe for keeping the learners' motivation very high during the whole course. There can always be some participants who are demotivated just by the fact that they have to go into that kind of environment. In this case it is difficult to work against. But away from it all there are indeed some nice possibilities to maintain motivation.

Examinations and Evaluation

In general the experts do not regard Second Life as a difficult place to hold an exam. Difficulties might arise in relation to the test design itself: tests can support the participants or they can do the opposite. So it is more about the general quality of a test than about holding it in Second Life. As well as in real life scenarios the participants can do a written exam or they might have an oral exam. However the obvious procedure in Second Life would be to hold oral exams where people have to do an interview for example or go to particular places where they have to deal with certain tasks. Doing an exam in which participants will only have to repeat certain answers they have memorized would nearly mean a waste of possibilities with regard to Second Life. Some of the experts do even regard the more traditional methods of examination as being a barrier to language development because they make language types like reading and writing more important than they should be. Because this might lead to the expectation that it is rather important to fit with the needs of an examination than with learning and using a language effectively.

The experts agreed that tests do not really measure somebody's progress after all. Instead teachers should recognize where students have started from and where they have ended. It is rather the productivity of the students that can and should be measured and therefore the experts regard self-assessment as more adequate than traditional examinations. In practice students should decide what they want to achieve during a language course and if the aims are realistic or not. After the course students are able to notice whether they have achieved their learning goals. But on the other hand some participants might want or need a confirmation of what they have done and achieved during the course. The obvious solution for that case could be a portfolio for example.

Successful learning unit

At which point could a learning unit be regarded as successful for the teacher as well as for the learners? This is a very difficult question indeed because learning is totally individual and therefore a course which is adequate for each participant could never be realized. Nevertheless some points were established to describe a successful learning unit.

Generally the success of a course depends on what the teacher and the learners try to get out of it. But simplified it can be said: learning goals should be set at the beginning of the course and agreed by the students. When these goals have been achieved a learning-unit can be regarded as successful.

Analyzing the interviews it became clear that the experts regard a learning unit as successful for the teacher when the possibility to go further than the learning material allows is given. So it's possible for the participants to enrich the situation and extend the unit to a point where it becomes more than the sum of the course plan. The students are able to contribute their knowledge and this means success for the teacher in most cases. Furthermore hearing the students expressing their thoughts in the target language also it also means success for the teacher. In this connection students should be able to realize and fix their mistakes on their own. In addition it is important for the learners to recognize the learning progress and the fact of getting better and more confident. The biggest satisfaction for the learners is when they come to the point of being able to express themselves more clearly. If the teacher finds a way of measuring the learning outcome you can easier demonstrate that the course has been successful.

Many teachers are also content with their group of students coming together and making some sort of common progress in different cases. A success for the teacher often means that nobody is left out and that everybody is integrated in the group.

In summary it should kept in mind that there are so many different learning styles and individual preferences in terms of learning a language that it is difficult to find out consistent assumptions which apply for all participants in the same way.

Enjoyment or learning

The question whether enjoyment or learning the language is more important has been answered quite similar. The most frequently given answers were:

“Well it’s enjoying to learn the language.”

“Enjoyment and learning go together.”

“The more you enjoy it, the better you learn pretty sure.”

“You learn a language better if it comes with enjoyment. It’s kind of tied together, it’s not really separated.”

Actually there are a lot of facts that come together when learning a language and enjoyment is just one of them. It is definitely important or rather an advantage being able to enjoy the learning process. But on the other hand learning a language is quite hard work of course, so it is not always to be enjoyable.

Though learning the language could be regarded as the ultimate and obvious goal of a language course, enjoyment seems to be equally important. But the essential point is that learners need some kind of engagement. That does not necessarily have to be fun all the time; it could also be anger, ambition, frustration, success etc. And finally, each student tends to learn in a different way.

Concentration

Is there a more intensive concentration within a language learning course in a 3-D environment than in a face to face course?

In a 3-D learning environment it is important that everyone is focused on what he/she is doing because one can get distracted very easily because of all the technical requirements you have to think of. Furthermore you have to listen much more carefully to the others (because of sound problems etc.). In this connection the teacher has to use other means to make sure people are concentrated at the moment (like sending them a text message or using people's first names etc.). In a 3D-environment the teacher very often can't really follow what the students are doing at the moment because he/she isn't able to actually see the others' actions. In such an environment people can become distracted in many different ways. In the face to face classroom it's easier to control the group because you can catch people's eyes.

In summary it can be said that there is a lot of involvement in a virtual language learning course because everyone is more involved in the actual situation and has to pull together in a way to make things work. It is imaginable that these circumstances also lead to a higher concentration.

Goals

The obvious general goal of language learning is that participants become a better user of language. In this context the same learning goals that count for a face to face environment can also be defined for a language course in Second Life, namely for example:

- Increasing the fluency of speaking
- Increasing the confidence of the speakers
- Activating the passive vocabulary
- Learning new vocabulary

The particular focuses depend on what aspects of language proficiency you want to improve in a course. The experts agreed that the ultimate goal in language training is to make students speak as much as they can and listen as well. Thus what matters is listening and speaking enhancement. After participating in a language course the learners should be more confident to use the language and have a greater sympathy with it – either orally or written.

Besides the obvious goal of learning or improving a language, attending a course in Second Life also means gaining technical knowledge concerning acting and moving in Second Life. Participants get an insight in how to behave and communicate in a 3-D environment.

After all it is clear that the exact goals depend on the type of the course as such. Teachers and Learners have to find out what they are trying to achieve within the course and then setup their ideal goals and learning outcomes.

Considering the various opportunities offered in an open 3-D environment, in summary it can be said that not the goals as such differ from a face to face course but the possibilities of achieving them.