Practicing the English Present Simple Tense in Active Worlds

Mariusz Kruk, University of Zielona Góra, Zielona Góra, Poland

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to determine the usefulness of using Active Worlds in teaching the English grammar. Specifically, the study examined the immediate and delayed effectiveness of using the chat feature of the Active Worlds’ virtual environment for teaching the English present simple tense. In addition, the study explored the attitudes of students receiving this intervention as compared to a traditional approach. The sample consisted of 22 Polish senior high school students. The learners in the experimental group were subjected to innovative instruction and the students in the control group were taught in a traditional way. The data were obtained by means of a background questionnaire, a grammar test and a post-questionnaire. The results show that both groups benefited from the instruction they received; however, the experimental learners’ long-term retention turned out to be much superior when compared with their control counterparts. What is more, the experimental students expressed more positive opinions of the lessons.

Keywords: Active Worlds, EFL, Present Simple Tense, Quasi-Experimental Study

INTRODUCTION

A virtual world can be defined as “a new computer medium that allows many users to simultaneously access the same computer generated space as virtual placeholders called avatars” (Kim, Lee, & Thomas, 2012, p. 3). Virtual worlds can also be understood as “immersive and social environments where learners can visit relevant locations online and meet with others for real-time (voice or text) conversations (Vickers, 2010, p. 75).

Virtual worlds can be used as a learning environment in an online course (Petrakou, 2010), since they provide a unique environment for language teachers and learners who are separated by distance to engage in social activities (Bronack, Riedl, & Tashner, 2006). They can be utilized in interactions between text chat and audio modalities for L2 communication and feedback (Wigham & Chanier, 2013). Virtual worlds can also increase students’ confidence and help to overcome cultural barriers in studying the target language (Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009). When compared with computer-mediated communication (CMC) interaction, the combination of text chat with personal avatars offers students access to multiple communication channels. For example, avatars can exhibit a choice of non-verbal communication cues that are difficult to reproduce in other sorts of synchronous CMC (cf. Peterson, 2008). Virtual worlds also offer

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2015100104
a simulation of space (i.e. the ability to project a simulation of 3D space or spatial aspect) (cf. Hew & Cheung, 2010) and experiential space in which students learn by doing and observe the outcomes of their actions (Chee, 2007).

Despite such benefits, empirical research on the use of virtual worlds in foreign language learning and teaching is still in its infancy, particularly when it comes to utilizing such worlds in teaching grammar. The present paper aimed at partly rectifying this problem by conducting a quasi-experimental study which investigated the usefulness of employing the virtual world Active Worlds and its chatting utility in English as a foreign language classes to practice the present simple tense. It was the belief of the researcher that the use of Active Worlds could be more beneficial for practicing grammar than traditional classroom setting because students could use it for communication, thus making the learning of it more motivating and meaningful for them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active (and Virtual) World Language Learning

The idea for Active Worlds (AW) originated from developers in San Diego, USA in 1994 (de Freitas, 2008). This virtual world was originally known as Alpha World and was officially opened in 1995 (Reis, Escudeiro, & Escudeiro, 2011). According to the AW’s website (https://www.activeworlds.com/about.html), Active Worlds hosts a Universe of over 1000 3D virtual reality worlds with its most popular being Alpha World. In these worlds clients can choose from a collection of avatars that fit their (perceived) personality and choose unique names for themselves. They enter the world through the Active Worlds browser and navigate in 3D virtual environments built by others (Kotsilieris & Dimopoulou, 2013).

For Gerhard, Moore and Hobbs (2004), personal avatars are the user’s on-screen persona or ‘user embodiment’ in a virtual environment. They can move about, play online games, shop, meet and talk with other people from all over the (real) world as well as initiate and participate in individual and group activities. In addition, avatars controlled by their users can display emotions such as happiness during synchronous interaction with other avatars-users. These entities are able to execute various actions and gestures, such as jumping or waving, which facilitate communication with other avatars. Finally, the possibility to display user-defined characteristics, such as appearance, lets users actively participate in the creation of a unique online personae (Peterson, 2005).

There is relatively little empirical research on the use of Active Worlds in teaching foreign languages. In one such study, Svensson (2003) investigated real-time interaction of native and non-native speaker participants in the AW environment and found out that the presence of avatars seemed to create a high level of telepresence, a relaxed atmosphere and the use of discourse management strategies (e.g. the utilization of keyboard symbols to display emotional states) by subjects in order to compensate for the lack of certain expressions. However, Toyoda and Harrison (2002) observed that a number of problems related to the lack of familiarity with Active Worlds and computer-based communication by the participants of the study as well as their limited computer skills led to limited communication.

Of relevance also is the study conducted by Peterson (2005), who observed interaction among 15 undergraduate students of English during a discussion task. Although the participants in the study experienced some problems related to the interface, they were able to overcome them by using the communication features of their avatars (e.g. waving). The researcher concluded that the use of both interactional and transactional discourse management strategies facilitated the production of intelligible discourse. Yet another study reported by Peterson (2006) examined
The Design and Implementation of English Instruction in Four High Schools with CSIEC System
(2015). *Intelligent Web-Based English Instruction in Middle Schools* (pp. 104-131).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-design-and-implementation-of-english-instruction-in-four-high-schools-with-csiec-system/119317?camid=4v1a

Flipping the High School English Classroom Without Flipping Out: Maximizing Tech to Make Space for Text
Deborah Brown (2017). *Applying the Flipped Classroom Model to English Language Arts Education* (pp. 111-128).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/flipping-the-high-school-english-classroom-without-flipping-out/180901?camid=4v1a