Chapter 4

Participating on More Equal Terms?
Power, Gender, and Participation in a Virtual World Learning Scenario

Mats Deutschmann
Örebro University, Sweden

Anders Steinvall
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6828-3009
Umeå University, Sweden

Airong Wang
Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the potential effects of unequal power relations on participation in a group of student teachers and invited professionals in two collaborative workshops in Second Life. The basic research enquiry addresses whether the relative anonymity afforded by virtual world environments has an effect on established power structures, thereby empowering relatively powerless language learners to more active participation than would be the case in more traditional learning set-ups. The data includes recordings, group reflections, and individual questionnaires. Participation was examined from the aspects of floor space, turn length, and utterance functions, and complemented with student reflections. The results show that the differences of floor space and turn length between the invited professionals and the students were small. The invited professionals did more conversational management than the students, while the students performed more supportive speech acts. No major gender differences in participation were found. There was, however, considerable individual variation.

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INTRODUCTION

The pedagogical potential of virtual worlds for language learning was recognised early in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) community, and ever since the emergence of these environments in the mid-1990s, there has been a steady stream of studies investigating their potential as language learning environments (Wigham, Panichi, Nocchi & Sadler, 2018). Hew & Cheung’s (2010) research review of studies up until 2008 points out that earlier studies were largely descriptive accounts of how environments had been used for learning, and also dealing with the affective domain: participants’ likes and dislikes regarding platforms such as Active Worlds and Second Life, for example. Kim, Lee & Thomas’ (2012) somewhat later review of 65 studies indicates that, while descriptive research still dominated, there was an increasing interest in experimental research, and also that the use of virtual worlds (VW) as communication spaces had increased drastically. According to Wigham et al. (2018), more recent VW CALL research has been empirical, focusing on the pursuit of finding pedagogic models for how the environments can be used successfully for language learning (see Blin, Nocchi & Fowley, 2013; Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012; Sadler, 2012; Wigham, 2012; Wigham & Chanier, 2013; Zheng & Newgarden, 2012; Panichi, 2014; Wang, 2017).

One feature highlighted as being of considerable significance in the pursuit of understanding and utilizing the full potential of VWs for language learning is that of interaction (Wigham et al., 2018). With reference to the current study, social interaction between the participants is of particular relevance. When studying interaction and participation in VWs, the complexity and the affordances of the environment, and how these in turn may affect participation, is of major interest (Boellstorff, 2015; Gregory, Lee, Dalgarno & Tynan, 2016). With this in mind, Lin, Wang, Grant, Chien & Lan (2014), call for further research into different teaching formats, and methods adapted specifically to VWs. Furthermore, according to Chen (2018, p. 964) a majority research into participation and interaction in VWs to date has been focused on text-based, rather than on voice-based task interaction, an area of research which therefore deserves more research attention according to Chen. The current study can thus be seen as an attempt to fill some of these gaps: we focus primarily on oral interaction between participants and try to evaluate how the learning environment (i.e. Second Life, hereafter SL) impacted the task design and our goals for the particular task at hand.

In spite of Chen’s (2018) claims that most VWs studies looking at social interaction have focussed on text-based communication, there are some noteworthy exceptions. Aspects related to designing active and equal oral participation in Second Life language courses are the focus of two studies (Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen 2009, and Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009b), which analyse variables such as floor space turn length and turn-taking patterns in oral tasks in order to identify how different oral task designs influence learners’ participation. The teacher’s role in encouraging active participation is also dealt with in Deutschmann & Panichi (2009). Here the authors are able to show how back-channeling and other ways of signaling active listening are important in this type of environment where facial expressions and body language are largely missing. Similar findings are confirmed in Wang (2017). With more specific focus on task design adapted to the affordances of Second Life, Jauregi & Canto (2012) show how a ‘networking design’ is used to bring native speakers and Dutch second language learners of Spanish together in meaningful interaction. Similarly, Chen (2018) is able to demonstrate how different networking task-designs trigger different types of language output in a mixed (ability and L1-background) group of English as a foreign language learners. Results indicated that more controlled so-called “jigsaw tasks” (“interactional tasks which require that each dyad member contributes equal