Designing a Virtual Social Space for Language Acquisition

Maria Alessandra Woolson, Middlebury College, USA

ABSTRACT

Middleverse de Español (MdE) is an evolving platform for foreign language (FL) study, aligned to the goals of ACTFL’s National Standards and 2007 MLA report. The project simulates an immersive environment in a virtual 3-D space for the acquisition of translingual and transcultural competence in Spanish meant to support content-based and communicative classroom practices. This paper describes the design of MdE on Second Life as a dynamic environment of integrated technologies and its selection criteria, including the pedagogical principles guiding design and practices. Pedagogy is further explored conceptually in addressing language acquisition and cultural immersion within the broader communication’s system of language, images and symbols of the digitalized age. The initial pilot demonstrates that negotiations of meaning and negative feedback intrinsic to virtual interactions promote repair moves. Furthermore, students’ reconfiguring of conventionalized norms of participation results in increased exchanges in the classroom that stimulate student-centered discussions and meaningful collaborative work.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning, Education Technology, Foreign Language Teaching, Pedagogy, Second Language Acquisition, Second Life, Virtual Worlds

“I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.” Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

Middleverse de Español (MdE) on Second Life represents an innovative approach to foreign language (FL) study that emphasizes flexibility and openness to adopting dynamic and evolving practices in search of the best way to meet student needs today while preparing them for tomorrow. MdE is also designed to meet the goals set forth by the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (ACTFL, 2000), and responds to the call for curricular reform seeking sound alternatives to mainstream teaching practices stated in the more recent 2007 MLA report, Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world (MLA, 2007). The central role of pedagogy, and the educational mission it encompasses, in selecting technologies that support classroom practices cannot be overstated. Furthermore pedagogical practices are central to guiding the spatial design and integration of specific components within the MdE space to develop it into a virtual alternative classroom for Spanish language acquisition.

This paper describes the design of MdE on the Second Life platform as an emergent
and dynamic environment that enables sensory experiences to raise cultural and language consciousness in an authentic context. I am here reporting on the experience of using MdE in a pilot project during the fall of 2009 at Middlebury College that involved a cohort of students enrolled in third semester Spanish. Within MdE, these students interacted with each other in pairs, in larger assigned groups as well as with instructors, invited guests and other students not enrolled in the course typically more advanced in the study of Spanish. Also described are the selection criteria used to identify Second Life as a technological platform and the pedagogical principles guiding the construction of the virtual space. To that end, pedagogy is further explored conceptually in explaining how interactions increase language proficiency in a culturally immersive setting and how students construct knowledge at a time of inevitable transformations of the learning environment due to digital technology.

The MdE environment and related pedagogical practices are designed for the acquisition of translingual and transcultural competence in Spanish, reflecting an integrative approach that situates “language study in cultural, historical, geographic and cross-cultural frames within the context of humanistic learning” (ACTFL 4). This approach is consistent with practices of language and cultural immersion in FL instruction that have demonstrated many advantages in language learning, whether in programs abroad, through simulation or intensive summer programs (Levine, 2004; Dupuy, 2004a, 2004b; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Segalowitz et al., 2004; Middlebury Language Schools: http://www.middlebury.edu/ls/). Second Life is a platform that allows simulation of a 3-D virtual immersive environment, which can provide authentic linguistic and cultural settings for students to embrace FL learning in meaningful and relevant ways. Specifically it offers an opportunity for integrating technologies already used successfully in FL teaching: Browser, Images, Digitalized Text, Video, 3-D modeling, Social Networking (Rymaszewski, 2007), many of which are popular with students today. More important for the goals of this project, Second Life incorporates synchronous Chat and Voice Chat that expand the benefits of voice interactions beyond the face-to-face classroom experience. Participation and interactions take place by adopting an “avatar” or human-humanoid three-dimensional virtual figure of customizable appearance. Creating a virtual identity entails many participatory opportunities from role-play to spontaneous social interpersonal exchanges prompting cultural competencies and self-correction strategies through synchronous conversation in the target language. MdE also employs principles from multiple areas of learning that conceive FL acquisition as a form of literacy immersed within the broader communication system of language, images and symbols of the digitalized age (Davidson, 2010).

As an environment to foment FL learning, MdE is intended to support a content-based and content-processing approach to teaching, in a communicative classroom.1 This support of class practices is attained through carefully planned activities in the virtual environment that promote dynamic and authentic interactions in the target language, thus increasing meaningful exchanges on a pedagogically sound platform that is designed to incorporate multiple sources of continuous cultural information.2 This encouraged language-processing that engages with content in a cultural context supports a content-oriented processing approach, or as Lightbown and Spada put it,

“[…] An opportunity to interact with other speakers, working together to reach mutual comprehension. Through these interactions, interlocutors figure out what they need to do to keep the conversation going and make the input comprehensible. […] And when communication is difficult, interlocutors must ‘negotiate for meaning,’ and this negotiation is seen as the opportunity for language development.” (2006, p. 43)

Further linguistic immersion is achieved as students pledge to interact solely in Spanish.
Systems Engineering Concepts with Aid of Virtual Worlds and Open Source Software: Using Technology to Develop Learning Objects and Simulation Environments
Latin Davis, Maurice Dawson and Marwan Omar (2016). Handbook of Research on 3-D Virtual Environments and Hypermedia for Ubiquitous Learning (pp. 483-509).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/systems-engineering-concepts-with-aid-of-virtual-worlds-and-open-source-software/153787?camid=4v1a

Second Language Distance Learning and Teaching: Theoretical Perspectives and Didactic Ergonomics
www.igi-global.com/article/second-language-distance-learning-teaching/62246?camid=4v1a