Towards Models for Designing Language Learning in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some of the overall frameworks and models for language learning that were used under Avalon (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline), an EU co-funded project aimed at developing language-learning scenarios in virtual worlds. The introduction and background summarize some of the theories that constitute the starting points for the designs and are followed by a discussion of how the affordances of virtual worlds support the communicative language-learning model used in the project. The authors' main focus then turns to pedagogic design, where the authors present the methods used during the project and some generic aspects of course designs that were developed. The article ends with a more specific look at examples of task design from the courses given under the project framework.

Keywords: Language Learning, Learning Design, Pedagogic Design, Task Design, Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present examples of language teaching in virtual worlds that were developed under the EU-co-financed project AVALON (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live Online). The scenarios we present were created with the specific aim of offering language teachers and course developers an overview of the main design issues they would be faced with when creating online language courses for delivery via virtual world platforms in their own contexts. The scenarios we discuss were developed using an Action Learning process where we used experiences from practical implementations of language learning courses in virtual worlds in order to develop models of best practice for these types of environments. This process used, as its starting point, the limited documentation of language learning in virtual worlds available at the outset of the project in 2009 (Lim, 2006; Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009; Molka-Danielsen et al., 2007; Peterson, 2001; Peterson, 2006; Schweinhorst, 2004; Stevens, 2006; Svensson, 2003, for example). In addition, more general models of design for online learning, such as Salmon’s five-stage model (Salmon, 2004), were adapted for the affordances present in virtual world environments. As the project pro-

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gressed, feedback from and observation of the courses fed into the shaping of the final models. In this sense, the courses that were developed under the AVALON project can be viewed as both a reflection of best practice at the time of their development (2009-2010), and as a means of gathering information about emergent best practice. The final outcomes and results of this process are published under a Creative Commons Licence on the project website in the sections on Models and Scenarios (Avalon Learning, 2010a).

The courses designed under the project clearly reflect socio-cultural and communicative language-learning theories. In discussing some of the reasons why these theories were initially understood to be relevant to language learning in virtual worlds and conversely why these environments were particularly well-suited for this type of learning, this paper includes both an overview of the special affordances that virtual worlds offer as well as an updated review of the initial research literature in the field which underpinned the design process and the development of models under AVALON.

BACKGROUND

Current Research into Language Learning in Virtual Worlds

Language learning in virtual worlds is gradually coming of age and the body of research in the field is growing. At the outset of the project, in 2009, this research was very limited and rather anecdotal. Most of what was written involved speculation about the potential of what virtual worlds could offer language education, and there were very few concrete descriptions of case studies involving the use of such environments in real courses (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009b:73). Since then several studies within the field have been published. These include specific case descriptions of language courses taught in virtual worlds (Peterson, 2010; Seng-Chee Ta & Yin-Mei Won, 2011; Zheng et al., 2009), more systematic descriptions of language course development in virtual worlds using frameworks such as action research and activity theory (Deutschmann et al., 2009; Deutschmann et al., 2011), models for task and environment design in virtual worlds (Blasing, 2010; Molka-Danielsen et al., 2009; Molka-Danielsen et al., 2010; Santos, 2010; Schiller, 2009), explorations of communicative aspects specific to virtual worlds (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009a; Wigham & Chanier, 2011), teacher and student perceptions of the learning environment and technology readiness (Wang et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2009), comparative studies of language learning in virtual worlds with more traditional Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools (Jauregi et al., 2011), recommendations for language research in virtual worlds (Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012), as well as systematic mappings of the affordances of virtual worlds and best practice models for teaching languages in these environments (Lim, 2009; Mayrath et al., 2009; Omale et al., 2009).

Communicative Language Learning and Virtual Worlds

Unlike many of the more traditional online learning software such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), for example, virtual worlds such as Second Life (hereafter referred to as SL) were primarily designed as social environments rather than educational tools. As such they are suited to socio-cultural and situated learning frameworks, models which maintain that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated through language and other symbol systems, and claim that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). These models are particularly relevant to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), where many argue (see Warschauer, 1997, for example) that student participation and engagement is achieved through interaction with others in the target language. According to this so-called Communicative Language Learning approach to SLA, language learning...
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