Students' Perception on Using Second Life Virtual Platform to Improve English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

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The advancement of educational and informational technology communication (ICT) has paved new alternatives for English language teaching and learning. The use of Virtual World has become increasingly popular compared to conventional methods. Second life is an example of a typical virtual phenomenon that has raised interest among educators around the world. Many educational institutions have turned to SL due to its immersive and interactive environment and offering classes to enhance their students' proficiency skills. This research is intended to elicit Iraqi students' perception on SL's potential as a virtual platform to improve English language learning. A qualitative case study was conducted. Data was collected through interviews. The research findings show that the learners were in favour of SL's potential on improving English language proficiency. SL is fun to use, and most important of all, the learners feel that it is a new alternative to English language learning and needs to be explored.

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1. Introduction

Recent developments in technology and virtual world have played an important role in enhancing and facilitating the effectiveness of English language education. Although Virtual Worlds (VWs) can be manifested in various forms since its establishment in the1980s, there is no single and consistent definition for VWs. Dickey (2005) defines the VW as a computer based online simulated environment allowing a large number of users to move and interact with one another through voice chat or text chat.

Duncan, Miller, and Jiang (2012) point out that the VW covers any online virtual environment that allows users to learn, to play or interact with others.

The major concern of education is how to enhance the learning outcome. Nowadays, the utilization of the VW has been seen as a valuable tool in education. The VW offers meaningful opportunities for learners to immerse themselves in valuable language learning contexts. The VW is a 3D computer generated program in a virtual environment that provides a high interactive and immersion effect to the users (Abdelazis, Riad & Senousy, 2014). One of the emerging VWs that is drawing increasing attention is Second Life.

In literature, learning English in a country like Iraq has always been a huge challenge for EFL students (Al Hosni, 2014).Therefore, helping students to learn the English language effectively is of great importance to Iraq for her survival in the years to come. The use of Second Life (SL) has received much attention and is increasingly favoured as a powerful tool, and an alternative to traditional methods of teaching and learning in education. In other words, learning in the VW provides learners with a sense of being there, a new avenue towards successful learning of the target language. It provides a unique opportunity to learn and practice language with other learners as well as native speakers (Carter & Elseth, 2009). This qualitative research is intended to investigate how Iraqi students' perceive the Second Life platform for enhancing English language skills.

2. Defining Second Life

Second Life is currently the best-known and most widely used example of a social virtual world. It was founded and developed by San Francisco Linden Lab, and launched in 2003. SL is defined as an online synchronous 3D virtual world (also stated as a Multi-Users Virtual Environment or MUVE) (Wang, Song, Xia, and Yan, 2009). SL was developed as an online society entirely built and owned by its residents. Linden Lab has produced SL platform filled with objects, adventures and experiences to be explored by the users. People enter SL for various purposes, and not limited to meeting other people, educating other people, working, and being educated and having fun along the way (Schiller, 2009).

The primary character of SL is its ability to create users known as "residents" through – avatars which represent the players actual self. The avatars, much like people in the real world, can do everything; buy-sell land, build houses, rent, dance, work, get married, attend university, and do several other activities on different venues or islands. The main difference between SL and other VWs is that the residents of SL hold the copyright on all content they create and are permitted to sell their content to other users in exchange for Linden dollars (L$), which have an exchange rate of 1 US$ being equal approx.: 260 L$ (Cheng, Zhan, and Tsai, 2010). The residents or avatars can communicate with others through traditional text chat, or voice chat (Keskitalo, Pyykkö, & Ruokamo, 2011). Furthermore, SL has the ability to record activities that take place within SL. In this context, learners have the opportunity to evaluate and reproduce on their personal performances and interactions with others by viewing their own recorded video clips in SL (Wang et al., 2009). Such an opportunity offers the instructors and researchers the ability to monitor and reflect on their students' ability both from the linguistic and social communication perspectives.

Furthermore, Inman, Wright, & Hartman (2010) clarify that SL allows users to create a persona and interact with others who are in the same environment at the same time, and change their appearance including their clothing, hair colour, and dresses within the environment. Furthermore, these are not the only things that can be manipulated in SL Audio or video clips. Power point presentations can also be uploaded into SL and attached to certain objects. Note cards that contain information that a teacher desires can be attached to any object in Second Life and captured with a click of the mouse (Carter & Elseth, 2009).

Consequently, SL supports students desire to explore the lessons that they have learned, and help them to practice in situations which may otherwise be unavailable in the convention of classroom. It is such potential that SL allows for educational institutions to build virtual campuses called islands for various purposes including business, educational use, political use and special group use as a way to engage students in immersive educational environments. This vital method of teaching and learning in SL is blending the theory and practice together with the distinctiveness of its environment (Carter & Elseth, 2009).   The opportunity to interact using the SL environment allows EFL students to communicate in English through personified virtual characters which would provide motivation and encouragement to learn the target language (Keskitalo, Pyykkö, & Ruokamo, 2011). SL is a very valuable tool for language learners because it offers them a meaningful opportunity to practice their language skills with native speakers and other learners. SL is a great alternative for learners who have a dearth of opportunities to hear and practice English in real world. Furthermore, the interaction with native speakers not only permits learners to practice oral skills and enhance their pronunciation but also provides some cultural awareness (Inman, Wright, & Hartman, 2010).

3. Second Life Platform in education

Communication is an important skill in life, and the ability to communicate in the English language is becoming an important soft skill to have in the 21st century. One of the primary goals of language teaching is to assist students to build their language skills. Mastering a second language like the English language is central to education. One of the significant methods to learn a foreign or second language is to engage in a community in which the target language is used to communicate in a real environment (Ibáñez et al., 2011). The interaction with native speakers or other learners of the target language has been recognized as an important aspect of the learning process (Ellis, 1999).Furthermore, Krashen (2003) points out that the advantage of dialogue in authentic situations is invaluable to language learners.

It is for the above reasons that SL has emerged as an alternative learning platform because of its ability to create an authentic learning environment. With such an environment, learners would immerse themselves in realistic setting for learning the target language (Gaukrodger and Atkins, 2013). In addition, Second Life can also be utilized to make learning more interesting and attractive with the purpose of improving second or foreign language learning due to its immersive and interactive environment. SL platform is a very valuable tool for language learners since it gives them the meaningful opportunity to practise language with people around the world (Hismanoglu, 2012). It can be an important learning tool because of its interactive and animated features. By interacting with the

avatars, users have a significant opportunity to practice, observe their action and learn by doing (Mabrito, 2012).

4. Interactions in Social-Constructivist Theory

Constructivism is basically a theory based on the idea that human construct knowledge and meaning from an interaction incorporating their experience and their ideas (Glasersfeld, 1989). Vygotsky (1978) pinpoints that learning take place through interaction in the learning environment rather than message transmission from the instructors. He suggests that knowledge is constructed in a social context and then appropriated by learners. Furthermore, he also asserts that the collaborative nature of learning views learning as a social activity where students learn from other students in a group through adopting new roles, sharing multiple perspectives, offering peer tutoring, and conducting tasks that would be difficult for a single learner.

Many researchers have applied Vygotsky's social constructivist theory to foreign and second language learning and teaching (Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman, 2015). These researchers have highlighted the important role that social and cultural contexts play in the process of language learning and the importance of participating in fruitful communication activities with knowledgeable people of the community. Thus, it is important to take into account the background and culture of the individual through the learning process.

The view of social constructivism learning is that individuals construct knowledge and meaning from interaction, learners interact with tools and objects in a virtual learning environment that allows the learners to construct their understanding and meaning (Coffman & Klinger, 2007). The other important aspect of the constructivism virtual learning environment is the authenticity of the learning environment. In the Second Life environment, learners are presented with 3D objects that are sometimes closer than in the real world. Thus, leaners in a virtual learning environment have opportunities for conversation as a method of learning. Therefore, Second Life environment supports learners' knowledge development through the creation of public entities that have meaning and are significant for them (Wang, Burton, and Falls, 2012).

5. Methodology

This qualitative case study is intended to elicit the perception of Iraqi postgraduate students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) towards using new technology like Second Life to improve their English language skills. A qualitative research has been adopted for this study. The Qualitative method is suitable when there is a need for exploring and understanding the interpretations of individuals or certain groups given a particular phenomenon or problem (Creswell, 2014). This study seeks illumination, understanding and exploration of the phenomenon or situation (Dzakiria, 2008). Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real world context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). In this study, the case under study is SL potential to help learners learn the English language. In order to attain a meaningful understanding of the impact of learning in Second Life, this study have attempted to interview participants to get their

perception on Second Life potential as an educational tool to improve one's English language proficiency and competency.

This study employed a semi-structure group interview method to collect the data required for the study. Creswell (2014) Points out that a focus group interview has some advantages specifically "when interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other" (p.240). In this study, coding technique (open and axial coding) was used for analysis the data obtained from the students' interviewing. Open coding was used to summarize the data into categories and axial coding was used to put those data into a new ways by making connections between category and its subcategories. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), coding is considered to be a dynamic and fluid process.

Three Iraq UUM students participated in this study. Dzakiria (2008) points out that qualitative research seek an in-depth understanding and exploration of the phenomenon under study. The interviews were pursued at the student convenience and conducted towards the end of the English proficiency course. Various interviews were conducted with all three respondents. The interview took about 25 to 40 minutes each time and occurred at a time and place that was suitable for the participants. These were recorded and transcribed later. The advantage of the interview is to help this research to collect suitable and consistent data that are significant to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014). The interviewees were chosen from different schools after they had passed the English proficiency course at UUM. They were Marrown a 27 year old doing his masters in computer science; Saleem who was 30 year old and doing masters in applied linguistics in English, and Yousif who was 38 year old and doing PhD in political science. They were willing to collaborate and participate after being brief about the research intent and methodology. They were also explained about the research process and the ethics and the confidentiality requirement that this research will abide to and respect. They were interviewed based on the interview protocol as attached (see Appendix A).

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

No.	Name of the participants	Age	Gender	Educational background	Expertise in computer usage	Internet Accessibility	Experience in e-learning
1	Marrown	27	male	Student of computer science	Very good	medium	No prior experience
2	Saleem	30	male	Student of Applied linguistics	good	good	No prior experience
3	Yousif	38	male	Students of political science	good	good	No prior experience

6. Results and Discussions

This study sought to understand the Iraqi postgraduate students' perception on Second Life to enhance their English language proficiency at UUM. All these Iraqi students study English as a compulsory subject from primary school up to university. 12 years of learning English in Iraq had not made these Iraqi students' proficient in the English language. Presently they are studying at Universiti Utara Malaysia. They had to take the English language course because of their low score in the English

proficiency test. At the beginning of the interview sessions, the interviewees were asked personal questions to help this research profile their background. The first question was "Which of these skills speaking, listening, writing, and reading do you think that you have the most problem with?" Marrown was not sure what to say: speaking and writing. "*Actually …. I don't have any problem with reading… I can say speaking and listening*." Such discourse suggested that he was actually unsure and had some problems with English language skills. When the interviewers said "so, can I say that you have problems with all skills?, he looked relaxed and answered with laughter, "*Yes*". Saleem's answer was also interesting. He iterated that he did not have any problem in English because he was studying applied linguistics in English, but he had some "anxiety" in speaking. Yousif's answer was similar to Marrown's answer. He had problems with all the English language skills. Following are some other discourse given by them:

> "*I don't have any problem with reading…..but I can say speaking and listening*"
> "*I don't have any problem in all English language skills because my area is English language and are doing master in applied linguistics but I have problem in language anxiety in speaking*".
> "*I had problem in all English language skills*".

After having heard answers of the Iraqi students, we were sure that all of them had similar problem with the English language skills. The next set of questions was technological related questions to elicit the collaborators knowledge on the use of educational technology tools in English language learning. "What kind of technological tool do you use to improve your English language skills?" At the beginning of this question, all of them gave me the same answer which was "*The computer and internet in daily basis*". Then, we asked them to give me more examples of specific websites, software programs or any technological tools they were using while studying English outside the classroom. Marrown's answered, "*I did chatting with foreign friends in Facebook*"; Saleem's answered "*I always use YouTube as a supplementary tool to understand the lesson that I take*. Yusif's answer was very interesting. "*I used many websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Skype, email, chat program and "MEN messenger*". Based on their answers, it can be concluded that they have good understanding of other possible means on English language learning. However, when asked "Have you ever used Second Life or any online 3D virtual worlds prior to this interview? All participants' answer was "*No*". We then made an effort to introduce Second life and made some effort to familiarise all of them with SL and what it can or cannot do.

Subsequently, we asked them the most important question of this study "Do you think using Second Life platform can help you improve your English? If yes, how? They all showed interest and were excited with SL potential and wanting to experience with it more:

> "*It is easy to install and have access to Second Life. I have chosen an avatar to represent me. I met many avatars during my navigation and communicated with them by text chat and voice chat. Actually, I felt good when I communicated with an avatar that was from the UK. His English was very clear. I think if I use this program constantly, my English will be better*".

Saleem's answered,

> "*I had problem with installation and managing Second Life application but after reading the instructions in the official website I could understand how to set up the program and*

> *how to choose an avatar as well as create account for the user. Actually, it is interesting to communicate with English native speakers and other learners. My confidence in speaking and chatting will be better in the future".*

Yousif's said,

> *"One of the objectives of my coming to Malaysia was to improve my English language skills. I found this program as an alternative way to spend a lot of time outside the campus to practice English. Second Life platform provides users meaningful opportunities to practice English with other learners. I accessed to this program many times and communicated with others by text chat and a little bit of voice chat. I met one user or avatar and I told him my English was not good and he promise of help me. He said "Don't worry" We can make a discussion group and you can join us at any time. I felt happiness because I will not have the anxiety that had always been with me".*

At the end of interview, we asked them "Do you think that Second Life technology can be an alternative and a significant tool to enhance your English skills". All participants answer *"Yes"*. They said that it helped them to do more practice and made English learning more interesting. It also made the English language learning experience more fun.

7. Conclusion

Teaching and learning English as a foreign language has always been a challenging task. This paper has introduced Second Life as an educational tool to enhance Iraqi postgraduate students' English language skills. The interviews illustrated that Iraqi postgraduate students' believe that using Second Life as an educational tool has great potential to enhance their English language skills and proficiency. They use Second Life platform to practice English and learn more about reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. In their interviews they are all agreed on the advantages of using Second Life platform while learning the English language skills. It allows learners to interact with native speakers and other learners through avatars.

In addition, they all perceived Second Life helped them to save time, do more practice, reduce their language anxiety, and made learning English more interesting. Using Second Life platform has the potential to help students to be more successful and efficient in English language skills. More research on such tool and application should be explored in search of better alternative to help students master the English language better.

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