

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SECOND LIFE: American and Turkish Students' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

There have been several attempts to integrate Web 2.0 technologies including podcasts, weblogs, wikis, and virtual 3D communities into language education thus far. Second Life, a virtual 3D community, might create unique opportunities for language learners specifically in the following ways: As a source of authentic interaction with target language speakers, a venue for language classes, and an autonomous study opportunity for learners. In this context, this study reports Second Life experiences of American students learning Turkish as a foreign language in the University of Florida, the USA and of Turkish students learning English as a foreign language at Gazi University, Turkey. The interviews demonstrated that both groups of students regarded Second Life as a contribution to authentic interaction with native language. Furthermore, the experiences indicated Second Life served as a good bridge for cultural competence and an inevitable tool to foster less threatened learning experiences despite challenges encountered on the way.

Keywords: Web 2.0, virtual communities, Second Life, Inguage learning.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that technology is an indispensable part of the twenty-first century. We live in the age of learning in which the information exchange is very fast and people do their best to keep up with the rapidly growing information. We move from a context where the information was scarce to another where the information is easily accessible and volatile (Jacobsen, Friesen, & Clifford, 2004). This shift has resulted in new web technologies like Web 2.0. As opposed to Web 1.0 connecting information and leading to the development of search engines, Web 2.0 is described as "a knowledge-oriented environment where users cooperatively create malleable content with shared presence that is synchronously and asynchronously distributed in wired and wireless networks" (Vallance, Vallance, & Matsui, 2009, p. 1).

This new version of Web connects people and allows for fundamental changes in the way individuals employ technologies that support a more social collaborative-networked environment (Thomas, 2009).

More than several hundreds of Web 2.0 tools available on the net include podcasts (iTunes), weblogs (Blogger), wikis (PBWiki), social bookmarking tools (del.icio.us), social networking tools (Facebook, Myspace), social media sharing tools (YouTube, Flickr), virtual 3D communities (Second Life, Sanalika), social library tools (Library Thing), customized sites (Goolepages), and collaborative writing tools (Zoho). The use of these Web 2.0 technologies is obviously altering the way people live, communicate, more specifically learn and teach in a variety of ways.

The application of Web technologies to education has radically changed especially over the last five years, along with myriad new developments and tools emerging one after the other. These technologies challenge the assumptions in the existing educational curricula proposing active learning methodologies. In lieu of teaching/learning modes in which information is transmitted from teachers to students, Web 2.0 tools are based on a social constructivist framework which provides opportunities for student-centred styles of learning.

Web 2.0 technologies offer educators unique opportunities for creating an effective and engaging learning environment where their students seem to learn in a more constructive way (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). That is to say, Web 2.0 technologies' emphasis on social communication fits well with the constructivist approach to teaching and learning. As far as language learning is concerned, it is a widespread perception that language learning is much more than a classroom experience. It also takes place informally outside the classroom. Out-of-class experiences play an important role by offering numerous possibilities to foreign language learners. Exposure to authentic language and opportunities to use the target language in natural situations are very important for out-of-class learning (Benson, 2001; Block & Cameron, 2001). In this regard, 3D (three-dimensional) virtual worlds, at least to some extent, seem to meet the need for authentic language use, and for interaction with native speakers. However, language teaching in 3D virtual worlds is still at its infancy. These virtual worlds, like Second Life (SL), attempt to replicate elements of the real world with practical applications in the mind (Kock, 2008). SL offers "immersive linguistic experiences outside formal classes, which promote the idea of learners seeking out target language areas of SL in which to practice their skills" (Pegrum, 2009, p. 30). Therefore, SL provides unique opportunities for language learners who wish to acquire the target language in a more constructive and engaging way.

Teaching Turkish, one of the less commonly taught languages, differs considerably from teaching languages like English, French and German in various ways. First, language materials prepared specifically for Turkish are scarce. Therefore, language teachers need alternative ways to overcome this problem. Second, learners studying the Turkish language do not have many encounters with native speakers of Turkish in a natural setting. That is, students may not be able to practice Turkish with native speakers as frequently as they should in order to improve their language skills. Third, learners of Turkish, like any other learners of a foreign language, may feel more threatened during a face-to-face interaction. Similarly, Turkish learners of English in Turkey are rarely provided with opportunities to interact with native speakers of English, which is a typical characteristic of EFL settings (English as a Foreign Language). Güney and Erten (2010) mention the speaking problems EFL students have including insufficient amount of time spent on the target language outside the classroom, the anxiety of speaking with native speakers and the limited class hours and their solutions to those specific problems. In order to cope with these problems, Turkish EFL students could be given numerous opportunities online to use English. This study reports Second Life experiences of American students learning Turkish as a foreign language in the University of Florida and of Turkish students learning English in Turkey.

SECOND LIFE

Virtual worlds are perhaps one of the most typical realization of the possibilities of Web 2.0 technologies. Virtual worlds, also known as MUVES (multi-user virtual environments) and MMORPGs (massively multi-player online role-playing games) (Dickey, 2005; Book, 2004), can be described as "environments created by technology that incorporate virtual representations of various elements found in the real world" (Kock, 2008, p. 1).

These virtual reality systems have created "a parallel world for entertainment, gaming, learning and even commerce" (Garcia-Ruiz, Edwards, & Aquino-Santos, 2008, p. 1). Users take on an online identity - an "avatar" - to represent themselves within the virtual community.

They are allowed to do almost everything they can do offline. Not only can an avatar walk, run and teleport from one place to another in this virtual world, but also s/he can communicate with other avatars using chat and instant messaging. These aspects are critically important for learners because they lead learners to use virtual worlds more enthusiastically.

This relates to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (1987, 1990), which is integrated into both human computer interface design and virtual reality. In this theory, it is argued that learning environments must be interesting enough to capture learners' attention, to arouse the curiosity during interaction processes, and to keep their attention as high as possible (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carleaux, & Tuzun, 2005).

Second Life is a virtual world that was developed by Linden Lab and launched on June 23, 2003. It is accessible via the Internet. It became "more prominent in late 2006 as a number of global corporations and educational institutions opened in it" (McCarty, 2009, p. 201). Anyone with a fairly robust computer and an Internet connection can use this virtual world online. Stevens (2007, p. 8) defines Second Life as "a playground (and) a crucible for ideas about how people can augment their interaction through constructive, and constructivist, play/work/whatever". Since its inception, it has become a ubiquitous application among technology users. As of January 2011, there were 26,785,531 SL Residents (accounts), of which 981,526 accounts were logged in during the last 7 days, and 1,444,530 accounts logged in during the last 60 days. According to Aaron Parker, the daily sign-ups in 2011 have increased from 2010 (even if that growth doesn't seem to be translating into *retained* users.). In addition to its various applications including Live Sport Entertainment, Gaming, Arts, SL is also used as a platform for education by many institutions, such as colleges, universities, libraries and government entities worldwide. Since SL was first launched in 2003, educators from all disciplines have been doing their parts to incorporate this virtual world into their own areas. There has been an increasing number of research studies carried out with regard to the uses of Virtual Worlds like Second Life (Childress & Braswell, 2006; Delwiche, 2006; Hayes, 2006; Livingstone, Kemp, & Edgar, 2008; Silva, 2008; Warburton, 2009; Whitton & Hollins, 2008). Second Life is mostly adopted as a learning environment for the following reasons. First, SL brings immersive, immediate and -more importantly- supportive, social and truly constructivist potential to e-learning (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007).

Learners are regarded as "active constructors of knowledge who bring their own needs, strategies and styles to learning, and skills and knowledge are best acquired within realistic contexts and authentic settings, where students are engaged in experiential learning tasks" (Felix, 2002, p. 3).

Thus, SL constitutes a perfect context to meet all such learners' needs. Furthermore, this virtual world offers "a socially and culturally situated context of cognition, in which knowledge is constructed in shared endeavours" (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, cited in Felix, 2005, p. 86).

As is often suggested by many educators, learning environments form a community that provides opportunities for learners to collaborate, to discover new information and to present information in new and meaningful ways (Coffman & Klinger, 2007).

In a similar vein, there are a lot of ways whereby learners' learning styles can be addressed thanks to various activities they are involved in virtual worlds. Second, SL, according to Winn (1993, cited in Zaretsky, p. 26) "allows first-person experiences by removing the interface that acts as a boundary between the participant and the computer" and "allows learners to construct knowledge from direct experience, not from descriptions of experience".

As a result, it is highly encouraged that educators develop specific learning activities, which reflect almost real world learning experiences through the communication triggered by this virtual world.

Third, instructors and researchers really favour SL because it is more personal than traditional distance learning (Lagorio, 2007). There is a lot of evidence (Childress & Braswell, 2006; Delwiche, 2006; Hayes, 2006; Livingstone, Kemp & Edgar, 2008; Steinkuelher, 2004; Stevens, 2006, 2007, Whitton & Hollins, 2008) suggesting that student engagement is augmented when learners are able to interact and create objects within a virtual environment. De Freitas (2008) identifies 80 virtual worlds such as "Role Play Worlds", "Social Worlds" and "Training Worlds".

She concludes that these virtual worlds enable learners to play "a different and enriched role in the process of forming collaborative learning experiences and engaging in activities which may support their own learning and meta-reflection" (de Freitas, 2008, p. 4). As is observed above, SL has been adopted as a learning tool in educational settings since its launch.

Second Life in Language Learning

Podcasting, blogs, SNS, virtual worlds, wikis and YouTube are all examples of Web 2.0 that have been enthusiastically researched and used for language learning purposes (Thomas, 2009). Obviously, Web 2.0 technologies appear to bring about an enormous transformation in language learning. This transformation is mostly based upon communicative interaction between language learners and native speakers, which is highly desired but rarely achieved in EFL contexts. Second Life, with over 21 million registered users as of 2011, seems to be one of the tools to be employed in language learning to overcome the problems associated with EFL contexts. The attempts to replicate to emerging needs in the case of language learning, however, have been slow but encouraging. Conferences, blogs and special issues of journals are the most common means to spread the idea of SL in language learning across the world. Mostly, research projects (Maurizi, 2009; Kern, 2009; Patterson, 2009; Savin-Baden, Tombs, White, Poulton, Kavia, & Woodham, 2009; Silva, 2008, <http://avalon-project.ning.com>) and virtual schools (avalon-project.ninn.com, languagelab.com, avatatlanguages.com, kamimoislands.com, blogspot.com, secondhouseofsweden.wordpress.com) are now looking at teaching and learning through virtual instruction. Language teachers may now use this virtual world in the following ways:

As a source of authentic interaction with target language speakers, a venue for language classes, and a networking opportunity for educators (Kern, 2009; Livingstone, Kemp, & Edgar, 2008; Stevens, 2006, 2007; Zhu, Wang, & Jia, 2007; Samur, 2011). First, SL can be considered to be a source of authentic interaction with target language speakers as it offers more opportunities to use the language in a more natural way. The greatest challenge language teachers' face is that EFL settings may not guarantee authentic language use. In this regard, SL, through its system that allows users to voice chat with others, seems to be one of the best tools that may have language users interact with real language.

Second, SL offers a venue for language classes where students and the teacher get together to learn and practice the language in a more nonthreatening way, which is indispensable in the creation of atmosphere conducive to learning.

Third, SL provides a networking opportunity for educationalists that are particularly interested in using virtual worlds in language learning. There are certain groups that allow their members to interact with each other on the common grounds. Some groups include classes like "ESL in Second Life, Second Life English, EFL/ESL in Second Life Team, English Village and I am learning English".

In this regard, SL serves as a bridge between classroom and real language to enable effective communication to emerge. The results of the study conducted by Boellstorff (2008) suggest that some non-native speakers of English enjoyed its ubiquity because it allowed them to practice English in an environment where grammatical errors were not the norm. Vickers (2009) alleges that SL allows for situated learning environments where students are given opportunities to develop their language skills, for SL is considered a valuable place for authentic communication without the fear of losing the face. To be more precise, language learners within SL can feel less threatened in interaction with native speakers of the target language since they are not psychically together. In sharp contrast to face-to-face interaction where EFL students are not feeling comfortable to take risks to interact with native speakers, SL offers stress-free environments, in which EFL students can communicate with other speakers more comfortably worldwide.

Jepson (2005) argues that the application of voice-chat SL offers may allow for language production that is more authentic since it is more useful "in terms of repair moves". Voice-chat, then, enables students to produce language in an authentic way. Similar to that, Rufer-Bach (2009, p.122) states that some practical reasons why SL gains importance in terms of language production are numerous. Henderson, Huang, Grant, and Henderson (2009) suggest that collaborative language activities in an immersive virtual world improve students' self-efficacy beliefs about their capacity to use Chinese language in a variety of real-life contexts. In other words, there was a change in self-efficacy ratings that can be explained by the degree of relevance of enactive mastery experiences. According to Stevens (2007), SL creates unique opportunities for language learners to develop their autonomous skills through engagement with the game design and authentic communication with other avatars worldwide. As is exemplified above, there have been certain attempts to research about the possible ways of using Second Life in language learning so far. The findings of the relevant research studies centre mostly on "authentic interaction with native speakers", "a venue for language classes", "networking opportunity for language teachers", "repair moves during the communication in the target language", "self-efficacy developed" and autonomous skills fostered".

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

There was only one research question of this research. It is:

What are EFL (English as a Foreign Language)/TFL (Turkish as a Foreign Language) students' experiences in Second Life?

Setting

In order to answer this research question, this study was carried out with two groups consisting of seven American learners studying Turkish in the USA and eight Turkish EFL learners who studied English in Turkey.

The first group of participants (American learners) was enrolled in the class entitled "Beginning Turkish II" in the spring semester of 2009 at The Center for European Studies (CES), University of Florida. The primary goal of the CES is to familiarize students with European issues through rich academic and cultural environments. Additionally, CES offers courses to teach several less commonly taught languages namely Czech language, Greek, Hungarian, Polish and Turkish. Students come from various majors, such as Political Sciences, History, Cultural Studies, Physics, Psychology and so on. The participants studied Turkish five hours a week. Since Turkish is one of the less commonly taught languages, American students did not have sufficient opportunities to use this language outside the classroom. As for the second group, the eight Turkish EFL learners participated in the study.

They were studying in the ELT Department of Gazi University. As in most EFL settings, they did not have any opportunities to practice English outside the classroom.

Data Collection

The study required the use of Second Life by both groups. Therefore, the researcher trained the groups in the basic skills of SL. The training program lasted seven hours mostly spent online prior to the actual study. It covered the following topics: Creating an avatar in SL, Moving Around, Handling the Camera, Communicating (using voice chat), Finding Things, Using the Display, Making Things. The researcher also underlined the following points. 1) Each student (some of them have already registered for SL) has to sign up for Second Life. 2) They should also spend some time on SL so as to familiarize themselves with SL. 3) They are expected to visit the online websites designed for the use of SL. Whenever necessary, the researcher helped them to get rid of any possible technical difficulties that emerged. Afterwards, it was decided that both groups could come together in SL at certain times. The researcher arranged meetings in SL taking into account the time difference between the USA and Turkey.

It was agreed that both groups would spend thirty minutes on practicing Turkish and then thirty minutes on practicing English. After the first meeting in SL, the researcher interviewed them by asking the questions prepared and piloted earlier. The interview questions went through different processes before they were used to collect the data of the study.

First, fifteen questions were formulated on the basis of the learners' experiences online. Dörnyei (2003) believes that in the process of writing questions some external feedback is indispensable especially when an initial item pool is prepared. With this in mind, these questions were sent off to two experts on the use of web technologies in language learning to get their suggestions for content/construct validity. In light of the suggestions made by these experts, it was decided that ten questions would be enough in the first place. Field-testing, which is an integral part of questions writing is "piloting the questions at various stages of their development on a sample of people who are similar to the target sample for which the questions have been asked" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 112).

These ten questions were piloted with five American and ten Turkish students who were familiar with the concept of Second Life and did not spend so much time on practicing languages. Fourth, after the implementation of the questions, it turned out that some interview questions were not clear enough for participants to respond properly. The questions that could be considered to be vague were removed from the list of interview questions. Fifth, there were five questions left to collect students' experiences with Second Life (See Appendix 2).

Learning activities

As time continued, both groups spent at least two hours a week together online in SL talking about different things including their customs, habits, daily routines, and topics that appealed to them. To exemplify, the students once talked about Thanksgiving and Ramadan Festival and its similarities. Four months later when the semester was over, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with both groups to find out how SL affected their language proficiency, and they experienced during the entire study.

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data was mostly based on categorizing the data collected immediately. The qualitative data were analyzed by the researcher. The constant comparative method, which is derived from the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), was used in analyzing the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that the constant comparison method has four distinct stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory.

In the process, the data were read until some underlying themes were discovered. After the participants were informed about the content and objectives of the study, the interviews were conducted with one participant at a time, between 20 minutes and 30 minutes. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview sessions were completed in Turkish and English. Then, the analyzed data in a relatively categorized form were presented to participants one by one. The procedure was completed after validating all the data with the participants. For instance, the place of cultural issues in SL was pronounced by students more than three times. These aspects repeated more than twice or three times were chosen as the findings of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings gathered qualitatively through semi-structured interviews (first and second) revealed that both groups enjoyed being in Second Life in the process of language learning.

The First Interviews: Benefits And Challenges

The first interviews with both groups were conducted just after the study commenced in the academic year of 2009. These interviews aimed to understand how both groups were doing with Second Life, to identify if there was any problem, and to compensate for what they could have missed. The data that emerged from the interviews done with both Turkish and American students were categorized in terms of benefits and challenges. More specifically, both groups indicated that they faced more challenges than they expected at the very beginning of the study.

"It is complicated to use SL because it entails many skills" (Turkish Student A).

Most students reported that even though they were given training on Second Life focusing mainly on the basic skills to survive in SL, both groups were not feeling comfortable working in SL doing a variety of things. Apart from the fact that both groups found the use of SL difficult at first, they also mentioned

"It is really interesting to employ such an application because we are experiencing something really different" (American Student B).

To be more precise, most language learners are of the opinion that this experience is likely to give them a great many opportunities through which they can develop their language skills.

In other words, both groups were quite positive towards the use of SL in language learning believing that this interesting experience will lead them to hone their language skills. It was a common idea that using SL for language learning was an interesting experience in that it gave both groups opportunities to interact with others who share the many things with them in a virtual world.

Moreover, the majority of students felt quite relieved in SL. Both groups went through a process of anxiety, confusion and excitement consecutively.

Finally, one of the most important challenges both groups faced at the very beginning of the study was that they did not know what to talk about, or how to spend time in SL.

To handle this, it was decided that the researcher and the participants needed to meet some time before the actual session in SL in order to determine possible topics to discuss. As is easily seen in the first interviews, both groups. As is easily seen from students' remarks, both groups addressed more expectations than concerns at the very beginning of the study.

Second Interviews: Authentic Language, Cultural Frames and Affective Filter

After the first interviews where both groups reported that they were excited to use SL in language learning despite challenges encountered on the way they spent two hours a week in SL for language learning purposes.

As time went by, it was recognized that both groups got used to employing SL. It turned out to be easier to navigate SL than anticipated in time. Spending some more time on websites designed for online training, the students got more interested in SL and opportunities this virtual world offered. In addition to this, the visual context, which surrounded SL, seemed to attract the attention of both groups.

"It is so colorful that we cannot get ourselves going online in SL"(Turkish Student C).

As is easily recognized from this statement, SL was regarded as an interesting place to spend time in specifically for language learning purposes. One of the Turkish students' comments revealed the fact that the students were involved in the learning context by feeling more self-confident. As Dudeney and Hocky (2007) explain, SL offers social constructivism through an immersive, immediate, supportive and social environment where students are easily involved in their own learning contexts.

"I see nothing to be concerned about. I am very relaxed when I am talking to them in SL"(Turkish Student F).

In a similar fashion, the students in this study reported that they were exposed to a social context where real life situations with which students were familiar occurred. This is highly related to the assumption that students' learning process will be actualized at the best level as long as they are acquainted with real life situations.

As opposed to the knowledge, in positivist terms, which can be discovered and also taught, constructivism, however, sees learning as a reorganization and restructuring of experience (Candy, 1989).

This relates to students' learning experiences in SL because students are given opportunities to get involved in a social setting to reorganize and restructure their own learning experiences through constructivism. As Vygotsky (1978) puts it, the social interaction lies in underlying principles of the effective learning. With this virtual world experience, the students found themselves in an environment where they felt immersed in language learning experiences.

*"SL offers great potential to practice Turkish as if I were in Turkey"
American Student D).*

Similarly, in conjunction with the assumption that "learners are active constructors of knowledge who bring their own needs, strategies and styles to learning, and that skills and knowledge are best acquired within realistic contexts and authentic settings, where students are engaged in experiential learning tasks" (Felix, 2002, p. 3), students enjoyed being engaged in experiential learning tasks including talking about their own cultures and learning more about the target culture.

"Each session is like another journey. We experience great things in SL. At the same time, practicing English was much easier" (Turkish Student B).

Another important benefit that both groups mentioned during the interviews was that they were experiencing the concept of mediation, a term used by psychologists of the social interactionist school. Williams and Burden (1997, p. 40) describe mediation as a term "referring to the part played by other significant people in the learners' lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them".

"Whenever I was not quite sure about one word, I was asking about it to my friends in SL" (Turkish Student D).

Both American and Turkish students acted as a mediator to one another since this included helping them to move into a next layer of knowledge or understanding. An important concept of social constructivism, scaffolding is a process of guiding the learner from what is presently known to what is to be known. In the process of scaffolding, learners first individualize incoming knowledge and then the mutual interaction begins (Vygotsky, 1978). Since the students both know their target languages very well, it was frequently recognized that they were trying to find ways of helping the other to learn.

As Hofstede and Hofstede (2005, p. xi) point out, "studying a language without being exposed to its culture is like practicing swimming without water". This statement indicates that language teaching should go hand in hand with culture because they are inextricably linked to each other (Rivers, 1981; Pedersen, 1988; Kramsch, 2001).

"Knowing more about Turkish culture like kissing elder people's hands is a great chance we had in SL. (American Student C).

The students during SL experiences noted that they were exposed to interesting cultural frames about the target language they were practicing. It was mostly recognized that knowing more about the target culture increased American students' motivation to learn Turkish. Since American culture is transmitted through movies, TV shows, and numerous online websites, Turkish students reported that they were already familiar with American culture. They, though, mentioned some similarities between Turkish and American culture. The last benefit observed during the interviews for both parties was that both groups reported that they were feeling less threatened through the sessions in SL.

As opposed to face-to-face interaction where EFL students feel so anxious, both groups were able to take risks to communicate with each other in a more relaxed atmosphere. American students reported that it was a kind of relief that they first practiced Turkish with their SL friends online before they continued with the actual friends in face-to-face interaction. This is highly critical in terms of humanistic approach as there is almost no perceived threat to the learner's self-image. In Rogerian terms, if there is "unconditional positive regard" in learning environments, "independence, risk taking, creativity and self-reliance are likely to flourish in learning situations where external criticism is kept to a minimum" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 35). In other words, there was "lower affective filter" (Krashen, 1977) in learning environments, which encouraged both groups to take risks for their own learning processes.

"Because Turkish is too difficult to learn I was unable to speak with native speakers. I was nervous trying to do so. But, I was feeling less threatened in SL because I could not see them. Anyway, I was relaxed"(American Student B).

It is highly believed that lower affective filter enables language learners to try to use the target language in stress-free environments (Couto, 2010).

The results of the current study are in line with those of the study conducted by Boellstorff (2008) in some non-native speakers of both English and Turkish had a chance to practice their target languages in a non-threatening way. Similarly, like Vicker's study (2009) which suggests that Second Life allows for situated learning environments where students are given opportunities to develop their language use, the students felt immersed in language learning processes through a non-threatening way.

As well as the benefits mentioned above, there were certain challenges encountered during the study especially in terms of the use of SL. The first challenge both groups faced was that it was not as easy to use SL as it seems at first. It was mostly agreed that one has to practice as frequently as possible so as to be competent enough to navigate SL. It was reported that this situation, however, did not prevent students from trying to use SL. Even though it was a bit too difficult to make use of SL at first, most students participated in online sessions to familiarize themselves with the application.

Another important issue both groups brought up was that students could not see the speaker's mouth, which challenged the students to understand their partners in SL. Similarly, it was difficult to show how a word is pronounced. Specifically Turkish students mentioned that they need a very powerful PC because there are certain requirements so that SL can be downloaded. To specify, the computer to be downloaded SL application should include the following specifications: Computer Processor: 1.5 GHz (XP), 2-GHz (Vista) 32-bit (x86) or better, Computer Memory: 1 GB or more, Graphics Card for XP: 9600-9800; Screen Resolution: 1024x768 pixels or higher. Turkish students reported that they had some problems connecting SL sometimes, which was to be covered soon.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided data on how Second Life can be employed in language learning. It focuses on Second Life experiences of both American students learning Turkish as a foreign language in the USA and Turkish learners studying English as a foreign language in Turkey. The study also contributes to the insights about the use of virtual worlds in language learning by focusing mostly on benefits and challenges.

In light of the findings of the research, one can categorize the SL experiences of both Turkish and American students in the following ways. First, SL provided a contribution to authentic interaction with native language. As is easily seen from students' comments, SL served as a place where language learners could be exposed to authentic interaction with target language speakers. Due to obvious reasons such as limited number of hours spent in classrooms of EFL and TFL (Turkish as a foreign language) settings, and lack of opportunities to use the target language outside the class, SL seems to have provided opportunities for students to practice the target language as frequently as they wish to do so. Second, SL offered a good bridge for cultural competence. SL, in this study, turned out to be a kind of cultural transmission because both groups could share their own cultural frames including customs and lifestyles with each other. Focusing on the belief that language and culture are inseparable, SL led students to get more curious about the target culture.

This curiosity increased both groups' motivation to use the target language and cultural components. In this regard, SL acted as a good bridge for increasing cultural competence of both groups. Third, SL was employed as a tool that fosters less threatened learning experiences. Students' experiences revealed that SL was an ideal place for students to take risks to communicate with target language speakers.

In other words, SL turned out to be an inevitable tool that fosters less threatened learning experiences. In line with the assumption that language learners should feel less threatened to interact with others, specifically during the face-to-face interaction. SL played a key role in encouraging language learners to use the authentic language in this virtual world. That is to say, SL was employed as a transition for language learners from the virtual experiences to real language use. On the basis of the findings, it would make sense to offer some suggestions for language teachers to employ virtual worlds like Second Life in the process of language learning.

First, to eliminate the barriers of using a foreign language in EFL settings, language teachers may introduce virtual worlds to their students so that both the teacher and students can spend some time practicing their target language online. Since language learners use virtual worlds for language learning purposes, their oral/communication skills develop in time.

By doing so, it is possible that language teachers can grade their students' proficiency in terms of whether they use virtual worlds for language learning purposes or not.

SL presents a potential alternative environment for language learning and teaching through its layout.

Second, language learners, specifically in EFL settings where there is not so much interaction with native speakers, may join language learning groups in SL such as "ESL in Second Life, Second Life English, EFL/ESL in Second Life Team, English Village and I am learning English" to improve their language proficiencies virtually.

This way, language learners are likely to develop their autonomous skills because they exercise independent skills automatically.

Related to that, language learners feel more relaxed as they spend more time on their own. In other words, language learners gain their self-confidence through which they can communicate with native speakers.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1- Interview questions

- 1- Is it easy to use Second Life?
- 2- Is it interesting? Why?
- 3- What do you think about Second Life in general? Please specify what you like or dislike about the application?
- 4- Is it good for language practice? How?
- 5- How does it contribute to your independent skills?

APPENDIX 2- A Sample Interview

- 1- Is it easy to use Second Life?
..Well, it is a kind of difficult actually. I mean I am familiar with computer games so it is not that difficult to navigate, but what is difficult is that you have to use SL and make sure you are cool with it. In other words, it needs practicing all the time. The more often I use, the better I can navigate Second Life.
- 2- Is it interesting? Why?
..Yes, it is definitely. I feel like I am in New York. I meet new people by feeling as if I were interacting with them. Also, the visual context was fabulous. (Sometimes it collapses, though). Flying is awesome because it gives me much more freedom than I can ever imagine. Whatever comes to mind, I do.
- 3- What do you think about Second Life in general? Please specify what you like or dislike about the application.
..What I like about Second Life in terms of language learning is that I am feeling less-threatened than a face-to-face interaction. When I want to speak with English or American speakers, no matter how much motivated I am, I cannot take risks and open my mouth. In Second Life, however, I don't see them, and there is no risk of losing face. Nothing to be embarrassed.
...I learn more about Turkish culture, which increases my motivation to learn Turkish. This gives me to search more about Turkey, and learn more about Turkish customs, lifestyles and traditions. The more I learn about Turkish culture, the more curious I get.
- 4- Is it good for language practice? How?
...It is absolutely beneficial for English because we use it with native speakers. We are involved in a social setting where I tend to use the language with others. Also, this chance enables me to practice English as frequently as I can. More importantly, I learn new daily expressions like `have a good one`, `I beg your pardon`, `I am off home`, and `I have no clue`
- 5- How does it contribute to your independent (studying la language outside the class on your own) skills?
... Class hours are limited (5 hours a week). This is not enough to learn a language effectively. What I need to do is to use Turkish outside the class. Unfortunately, here in Gainesville, not many opportunities are available for us to practice Turkish. There are some Turkish folks around, but I get anxious when I try to talk to them. Whenever I have time (apart from the specific SL sessions arranged by the instructor, I find some more friends to practice Turkish with.