



Using Second Life Platform for Improving English Language Skills: Students' Perception

Riad F. Hassan^{1,2*}, Hisham Dzakiria³, Rozhan M. Idrus⁴

¹College of Art and Science, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia, ²Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific, Iraq, ³College of Art and Science, Universiti Utara Malaysia UUM, Malaysia, ⁴Global Open Access Learning Centre, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia. *Email: riadfow@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Educational researchers have paid considerable attention to the use of virtual world platforms in order to support English learning process. The use of virtual world has become increasingly popular compared to conventional methods. Second life (SL) 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 study is intended to elicit Iraqi students' perception of 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 favor of SL's potential in 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.

Keywords: Second Life, English Learning, Students' Perception, Social Constructivism

JEL Classifications: I210, Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the education system has undergone many changes. Thus, educational researchers have paid considerable attention to the use of virtual world platforms in order to support the learning process. Virtual world can be defined as a computer based online simulated environment in which users (avatars) can move and interact with each other through tools such as integrated voice chat, text chat, group chat and other ways of communication (Dickey, 2005). Virtual world allows users to learn, play or interact with others (Duncan et al., 2012). Moreover, Becerra and Stutts (2008) considered virtual world as a "synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by network computers" (p. 2).

Furthermore, Esteves et al. (2011), clarify that new technologies have changed the learning and teaching method by bringing new opportunities to educational activities. Virtual reality is a combination of virtual world and the real world to create a simulated dynamic process which allows multiple users to

learn and interact with one another in a computer-simulated environment. Currently, second life (SL) is the most recent and most common multiuser virtual platform that has been used for such purposes.

In Iraq, learning English has always been a great 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 years to come. The incorporation of SL platform into the language learning curriculum not only offers real-life like audio-visual simulations, but also integrates both virtual and real-life learning environments which promote interaction, encouraging learners' interests and learning competence (Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015). The real question to be addressed in this study is "What are the Iraqi students' perceptions at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) toward using SL as a tool to improve their English language skills?"

In other words, learning in the virtual environment provides learners with a sense of being there, a new avenue towards the successful learning of the target language. It offers a meaningful

opportunity to learn and practice the language through interaction with native speakers and other learners. This qualitative research is intended to investigate how Iraqi students' perceive SL platform to enhance English language skills.

2. DEFINING SL

SL is one of the three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds. It is defined as an online synchronous 3D virtual world (also referred to as a multi-users virtual environment or MUVE). It was developed by a San Francisco based Linden Lab, and launched in 2003. It was made available on the Internet and marketed with the following statements "Enter a world with infinite possibilities and live a life without boundaries, guided only by your imagination" (Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015) p.92. Linden Lab has generated SL platform filled with objects, adventures and experiences to be explored by the users. SL is broadly used on a global scale by individuals users, business, educators, government agencies, and non-profit organizations as some form of activity, social networking, education, researching, and is utilized over 90% of virtual world market (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, working, dancing, attend university, get married, and do various other activities on different islands or venues. In other words, SL is a digital presence consisting of a multitude of islands which can be broken up to be bought and sold by avatars. The currency in SL is Linden \$, which an exchange rate of 1 US\$ being equal approximately: 260 L\$. Thus, the environment within SL is an imitation of human reality (Cheng et al., 2010). The avatars can communicate with others through traditional text chat, or the use of more recent incorporation of voice chat (Keskitalo et al., 2011). SL also has the ability to record actions that occur within SL. In this case, learners have the opportunity to assess and reflect on their personal performances and interactions with others by viewing their own recorded video clips in SL (Wang et al., 2009). Such opportunity offers the instructors and researchers the ability to monitor and reflect on their learners' proficiency both from the linguistic and social communication perspective.

In addition, SL allows students to create a persona (animals, human or something in between) and interact with others who are in the same environment at the same time, and change their appearance including their clothing, hair color, and dresses within the environment (Inman et al., 2010). At the same time, 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 SL and captured with a click of the mouse. Additionally, words or phrases can be attached to objects as floating script, so the students do not have to click on an object to get a written version of its corresponding words (Carter and Dayton, 2009).

There are numerous colleges and universities involved with SL for educational or research purposes. From the educational

perspective, SL helps learners to explore the lessons that they have learned, and help them to practice in situations which may otherwise be inflexible in the traditional classroom. Currently, many educational institutions have used SL as a way to engage students in immersive educational environments.

This crucial method of teaching in SL is blending the theory and practice together with the distinctiveness of its environment (Carter and Dayton, 2009). The opportunity to interact using SL virtual environment platforms allows EFL learners to communicate in English through personified virtual characters which would provide motivation and encouragement to learn the target language (Keskitalo et al., 2011). SL is a very useful tool for language learners as it provides them a unique opportunity to use their language skills with other learners with native speaker ability. SL is a great alternative for learners who have a dearth of opportunities to use, hear, and practice English in real life. In addition, the contact with native speakers not only allows students to practice oral skills and improve their pronunciation but also provides some cultural awareness (Inman et al., 2010).

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SL

The question of why should be SL used as an educational tool has been asked several times and for many it is easy answer. SL is not an easily accepted by some who are traditional or by those who refuse to learn new technology innovation. They are still those who cannot acknowledge willingly that SL may be used as a tool for the purpose of education. One of the best ways to learn a foreign language is to expose learners to authentic situations in which the target language is used to communicate in a real environment (Ibáñez et al., 2011). The communication with other learners or native speakers of the target language has been recognized as an essential part of the language learning process (Ellis and Sandra, 1999). The advantage of meaningful conversation in realistic situations is invaluable to language learners (Krashen, 2003).

It is for the above reasons that SL has emerged as an alternative learning platform because of its ability to create authentic learning conditions where learners can meet and hold authentic dialogues in a simulated environment, giving individuals a sense of "being there" with native speakers (Gaukrodger and Clare, 2013). In addition, SL 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 useful tool for foreign language learners because it gives them the unique opportunity to practice language with native speakers and non-native speakers of English from all over the world (Hismanoglu, 2012). It can be an important learning environment due to its interactive and animated features. By interacting with the objects (avatars), learners have meaningful opportunities to practice, observe their action and learn by doing (Mabrito, 2012).

4. SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIONST THEORY

Constructivism is basically a theory based on the idea that humans construct knowledge and meaning from an interaction incorporating their experience and their ideas (von Glasersfeld,

1989). The role of interaction has been emphasized by the social-constructivist learning theory rooted by Lee Vygotsky's work. Vygotsky (1980) pointed out that learning occurs through interaction. He suggested that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and is then appropriated by learners. He also asserts that the concept of development of learning could not be understood without reference to the social and cultural contexts in which these concepts are embedded. Therefore, social constructivism requires one primary element; two or more learners. Those learners must be involved in some form of interaction for knowledge to be constructed. They make meanings through the interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

Many researchers have applied Vygotsky's social constructivist theory to second and foreign language teaching and learning (Swain et al., 2015). These researchers have emphasized the significant role that social and cultural contexts play in the process of language learning and the importance of participating in meaningful communication activities with other members of a speaking community.

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

5. METHODOLOGY

This study was prompted by a desire to investigate the question: What are the Iraqi students' perceptions at UUM toward using SL as a tool to improve their English language skills? A qualitative case study 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, 2002). This study seeks illumination, understanding and exploration of the phenomenon or situation (Dzakiria, 2008). A 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 the SL potential to help learners learn the English language as a foreign language. In order to

attain a meaningful understanding of the impact of learning in SL, this study has attempted to interview participants to get their perception of SL potential as an educational tool to improve one's English language skills.

This study employed a semi-structure group interview method to collect the data required for the study. Vygotsky (1980) 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 Strauss and Juliet (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 25-40 min 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 (Vygotsky, 1980). 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 (Table 1).

6. RESULT OF THE STUDY

This study sought to understand the Iraqi postgraduate students' perception on SL 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 UUM. 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

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Name of the participants	Age	Gender	Educational background	Expertise in compute usage	Internet accessibility	Experience in e-learning
Marrown	27	Male	Student of computer science	Very good	Medium	No prior experience
Saleem	30	Male	Student of applied linguistics	Good	Good	No prior experience
Yousif	38	Male	Student of political science	Good	Good	No prior experience

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 I'm are doing my master in applied linguistics. But I have anxiety in speaking"

"I have 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 technology related 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 us the same answer which was "The computer and internet on a 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 answered, "I did chatting with foreign friends on Facebook"; Saleem 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 the knowledge of other possible means on English language learning. However, when asked "Have you ever used SL or any online 3D virtual worlds prior to this interview?" All participants' answer was "No." We then made an effort to introduce SL and made some effort to familiarize all of them with SL and what it could or could not do.

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

"It is easy to install and have access to SL. 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 answered,

"I had problem with installation and managing SL 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 an 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 said,

"One of the objectives of my coming to Malaysia was to improve my English language skills. I found this program an alternative way to spend a lot of time outside the campus to practice English. SL platform provides users meaningful opportunities to practice English with other learners. I accessed 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 to 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 SL technology can be an alternative and a significant tool to enhance your English skills?" All participants answered "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

Learning a foreign language has always been a challenging task for learners. This study has introduced SL as an educational tool to enhance Iraqi postgraduate students' English language skills. The interviews illustrated that Iraqi postgraduate students' believe that using SL as an educational tool has great potential to enhance their English language skills and proficiency. They use SL platform to practice English and learn more about reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. In their interviews they all agreed on the advantages of using SL 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 SL helped them to save time, do more practice, reduce their language anxiety, and made learning English more interesting. Using SL platform has the potential to help students to be more successful and efficient in English language skills. More research on such tools and their application should be explored in search of better alternatives to help students master the English language better.

REFERENCES

- Al Hosni, S. (2014), Speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 2(6), 22-30.
- Becerra, E.P., Stutts, M.A. (2008), Toward a definition of virtual worlds. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1, 1-5.
- Carter, B., Dayton, E. (2009), The usefulness of second life for language learning. *Handbook of Research on E-Learning Methodologies for Language Acquisition*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

p443-455.

- Cheng, H.J., Hong, Z., Andy, T. (2010), Integrating second life into a Chinese language teacher training program: A pilot study. *Journal of Technology and Chinese Language Teaching*, 1(1), 31-58.
- Coffman, T., Klinger, M.B. (2007), Utilizing virtual worlds in education: The implications for practice. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(1), 29-33.
- Creswell, J.W. (2002), *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative*. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River.
- Dickey, M.D. (2005), Three-dimensional virtual worlds and distance learning: Two case studies of active worlds as a medium for distance education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(3), 439-451.
- Duncan, I., Alan, M., Shangyi, J. (2012), A taxonomy of virtual worlds usage in education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(6), 949-964.
- Dzakiria, H. (2008), *Pragmatic Approach to Qualitative Case Study Research Learning by Doing a Case of Distance Learning Research in Malaysia*. Sintok: Utara Malaysia.
- Ellis, R., Sandra, F. (1999), *Learning a Second Language Through Interaction*. Vol. 17. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Esteves, M., Fonseca, B., Morgado, L., Micaela, P.M. (2011), Improving teaching and learning of computer programming through the use of the second life virtual world. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(4), 624-637.
- Gaukrodger, B., Clare, A. (2013). *Second Life Calling: Language Learners Communicating Virtually Across the World*. 30th Ascilite Conference, 1-4 December. Sydney: Macquarie University.
- Hismanoglu, M. (2012), Integrating second life into an EFL classroom: A new dimension in foreign language learning and teaching. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications*, 3(4), 100-111.
- Ibáñez, M.B., Galán, J.J.G., Maroto, D., Morillo, D., Kloos, C.D. (2011), Design and Implementation of a 3D multi-user virtual world for language learning. *Educational Technology and Society*, 14(4), 2-10.
- Inman, C., Wright, V.H., Hartman, J.A. (2010), Use of second life in K-12 and higher education: A review of research. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 9(1), 44-63.
- Keskitalo, T., Elli, P., Heli, R. (2011), Exploring the meaningful learning of students in second life. *Educational Technology and Society*, 14(1), 16-26.
- Krashen, S.D. (2003), *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Mabrito, M. (2012), Student as Avatar: A study of informational preferences in a virtual world class. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 8(2), 111.
- Reinsmith-Jones, K., Kibbe, S., Crayton, T. (2015), Use of second life in social work education: Virtual world experiences and their effect on students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 51(1), 90-108.
- Schiller, S.Z. (2009), Practicing learner-centered teaching: Pedagogical design and assessment of a second life project. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 20(3), 369.
- Strauss, A., Juliet, C. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Vol. 15. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Swain, M., Penny, K., Linda, S. (2015), *Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education: An Introduction Through Narratives*. Vol. 11. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Von Glasersfeld, E. (1989), Cognition, construction of knowledge, and teaching. *Synthese*, 80(1), 121-140.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1980), *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wang, C., Song, H., Xia, F., Yan, Q. (2009), Integrating second life into an EFL program: Students' perspectives. *Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange*, 2, 1-16.
- Wang, F., Burton, J.K., Falls, J. (2012), A three-step model for designing initial second life-based foreign language learning activities. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 8(4), 324.
- Yin, R. (1994), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.