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## Will Second Life® help me Survive in Italy? [1]

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### Abstract

*This paper aims at sharing the experience we had in the design and implementation of a short pilot course of Italian in Second Life® (SL). The paper will provide a description of the course mentioning preliminary findings, discussed in relation to the theories adopted by the two researchers. The paper is the result of the course, La Lingua in gioco: dire, fare e giocare in SL, that had a strong focus on the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and Oral Language Proficiency and was aimed at a group of third-level Irish students of Italian in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), who will spend the third year of their degree in Italy (Erasmus programme). SL was used as a virtual platform for foreign language education and learners' engagement and as a support to face-to-face classes. This course is a part of a main project, Café Italia, an experiment about teaching and learning Italian in SL carried out by the University of Palermo.*

### 1. Exploiting SL® for the development of Intercultural and Language

#### Competence

Second Life® (SL) is still the most popular social Virtual World (VW) among users, educators and researchers. The peculiarities of VWs, synchronicity, persistency and the use of avatars [2] make them an exciting arena for language teachers, by providing a wealth of opportunities for learning by doing, simulation, virtual educational tours, cooperative learning, e-learning, co-creation and sharing within collaborative settings. Also, VWs can offer both the communicative and constructivist opportunities of asynchronous Virtual Environment (VE) and MUD Object Oriented (MOO) together with the strengths afforded by 3D representations peculiar to Virtual Reality environments, providing a real potential for language teaching, especially as studies on the sense of presence in Virtual Reality (VR) and in VWs [3], [4], [5], show that online experiences can be as real as 'real' life. In a varied setting such a SL, with residents travelling extensively and approaching all sorts of different communities, an abundance of public spheres makes for a varied and variable nature of communication [6], creating a potential for Intercultural Communication (IC) exchanges and, as SL offers both tech culture and a social dimension comparable both to the one found in the 'piazzas' and cafés of the past and the global village of the new digital environments, it allows us to accomplish new ways of communicating that help bridging gaps among people, deleting physical space-time and cultural distances.

#### 1.2. A conceptualisation of culture

The researchers adopted a non-static definition of culture, in which communication plays a strong role, elaborating Kim's [7] definition: "a universe of information and operative linguistic and non-linguistic communication rituals that gives coherence, continuity, and distinction to a communal way of life." and integrating it with the Vygotskian vision of culture, where culture is not just an ensemble of beliefs and knowledge, interwoven in communication, but an essential part of the cultural artefact. This carries important theoretical consequences for the analysis of what happened during the experience as



communicational and inter-cultural exchanges were observed as encounters within and through a medium which by itself has a strong cultural individuality. Students' visits to SL and their contacts with others became similar to the visit of a sojourner to a different country and the contact with representatives of a different society.

## 2. The experience of Café Italia and the design of the course

Café Italia [8] has been carried out since 2007 in order to investigate the impact of social networks and Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVes) on language teaching. The main object of Café Italia is to observe how social technologies can be used in teaching languages to promote motivation, inclusion in mixed ability classes and to improve language skills. The objective is to see whether this approach can help F2F classes and suggest solutions to the problems that may occur in practicing foreign languages. The research method is based on the observation of actors during the teaching-learning process through Total Physical Response (TPR) and Task Based Action (TBA) activities and the analysis of frequent problems, which aims at improving both teaching practice and learning.

The main objectives of this project are:

- to create “case-study” with communicative field testing scenarios;
- to facilitate access to foreign languages in a place where the economic resources are limited;
- to re-create a variety of situations and environments typical of a foreign country;
- to promote awareness of VVs' potential for language teaching.

Café Italia aims at presenting in an informal way various facets of Italian culture and at improving ICC. Cultural aspects aren't just simply described; they are discovered through analysis, and comparison with the learners' own model, who, at the same time, become aware of their own culture. The linguistic objective is accomplished through the use of the target language in an authentic context with native speakers through the awareness of Italian social and cultural aspects and of how to behave in different environments and situations. Café Italia offers a cycle of weekly events, each of them based on a plot and ending with an excursion to a 3D Italian land, in SL. The project is supported by Web 2.0 tools giving learners the opportunity to have an in-depth study after each meeting.

### 2.1. La Lingua in gioco: dire, fare e giocare in SL

The SL course envisioned for Level 9P by the DIT lecturer fitted perfectly into Café Italia's pedagogical philosophy, and the collaboration started. The course was designed for a group of third-level Irish students of Italian in the International Business and Languages (IBL) degree in DIT, who are required to spend their third year in Italy as part of their degree. The intended learning outcomes were to get students acquainted with some of the situations they may encounter during their Erasmus experience in Italy, provide them with domain related vocabulary and to immerse them in an Italian setting with native Italian speakers. The course adopted a learning by experience approach.

Partner Institutions: The project was organised and designed by the University of Palermo and realised with the participation of 2 partner institutions:

- ITALS University of Venice Ca' Foscari, Italy
- Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

**Target Audience:** 3 year II Irish students from the IBL degree in DIT. The course was part of Level 9P, a year-long module aimed at preparing them for their Erasmus year, which is an integral part of the degree. None of the students had had prior experience with Second Life.

**Target Language:** Italian

**Language of Instruction:** Italian

**Students' Target Language Competence:** mixed ability, A1 to B1 lower of CEFR.

**Native Speakers:** two lecturers (Ms. Dell'Aria and Ms. Nocchi), four of Ms. Dell'Aria's Italian University students who took active part in the sessions, an external observer who watched video recordings and analysed data.

**Description of Course:** the course was structured in 6 sessions of about 60-90 minutes, once a week over 3 months, during the second teaching term. Each session portrayed a different cultural situation, took place within a different environment and provided various tasks: role-plays, conversation, simulation, quizzes and games. Each topic was completed in 2 lessons: one face-to-face and one inworld. The SL sessions accounted for 40% of the assessment for Level 9P. Students who had home access to SL were offered the choice to take the course. Other students took an alternative assessment.

During the course the Irish students interacted with 4 Italian students. Specific pair or group tasks were allocated for the development of language competence and IC awareness. The topics for the six sessions were:

Session	Title	Situation	Theme	Quiz/Game
1	Arrival and welcome	Airport	Relations to foreign people and cultures	A drop of Italy Hangman
2	In a bank	Bank	Money, currencies, bank services	Bank robbery The price is right.
3	Health and the Health Service	Hospital	Human body, wellness, health care	Let's play Doctors.
4	At the police station	Police station	Society And state services	The dice are thrown
5	Looking for accommodation	House	Houses, Places, furniture	The outsider Jump, click and answer
6	At the university	University	Education, Italian educational system	Sloodle Lindenaire. The fastest finger!

**Table 1**

**Research design:** Phase 1: instructional design; Phase 2: implementation of the syllabus in SL by the two lecturers; Phase 3: separate data analysis and interpretation.

**Data Collection:** A collaborative wiki [9] was set up for students and tutors with information on each of the sessions, reading material, vocabulary, videos and questionnaires on their experience. Students were encouraged to access it. Excerpts from recordings and photos of each session were regularly uploaded on the wiki. Login into the wiki was anonymous and students were asked to write comments on each the session. Each student started the experience by completing two short online questionnaires [10] which they found on the wiki homepage. They were also asked to answer a few questions about their experience with the Internet and their expectations regarding the course. Each of the six sessions was recorded. Records of text-chats were kept, when needed. At the end of each session students were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their experience. At the end of the course each student was asked to fill in two questionnaires regarding the course and to participate in an individual semi-structured interview with the researcher.

### 3. Description of the research, collection of data and data analysis [11]

This is a focused and a qualitative study. The researchers' interest was:

- to analyse critically the methodology and the tasks in order to isolate instances of disruption in communication and evidentiare solutions and ideas of best practice
- to observe which SL affordances are available to design tasks for the development of ICC
- to evaluate "how" and "how much" quizzes and games give new opportunities to practice Italian and "if" students feel involved when they are learning by playing.

Collection of data included both qualitative and quantitative methods through many sources and allowed for data triangulation [12], that helped reduce the likelihood of error in the findings of this study when similar results were reported from two or more of the sources. In order to reduce the volume of collected information, the data were identified and organized into important patterns and themes without minimizing or distorting any data. For the purpose of this paper, self-report in the form of interviewing, direct observation, surveys, pre and post questionnaires, diaries and journals, blogs and wiki's history pages, video recordings and transcriptions have been selected because they provide the most accurate information regarding the effectiveness of the study in the researchers' current environment.

The sessions were also observed using an Activity Theory (AT) framework, analysing the SL course as an activity system as a whole, and each different task as an activity system in its own right. According to AT, instances of disruption in the activity system may be caused by contradictions in the system and create a potential for learning [13]; the researcher focused on role-plays and reached some preliminary findings.

### 4. Overall results

Observing the learners playing Italian quizzes and games shows greater motivation and engagement while playing than when performing traditional tasks. The results of the research also indicate that "games" are an adequate skill practice as they provide engagement, motivation and fun. On the other hand, designing and managing them requires a considerable time and effort from teachers and students.

Observing the tasks showed how some affordances of SL increased motivation and interest in students. Among these some are intuitive, stimulating and inventive such as using HUDs (Head Upon Displays), scripted objects with audio file, trivia machines, Holodeck [14], Sloodle quiz chair [15] and changing appearance. One of the affordances of VWs that proved invaluable for role-plays is the availability of native speakers, who provided that authenticity to the task, that can never be attained in a standard classroom situation. The mediation supplied by the Italian native speakers was also a source of language related problems, especially for the weaker student in the group, who, however, was very positive about the overall experience. An AT analysis of the role-plays highlighted also moments of IC awareness and showed how useful this type of task can be for ICC development.

We noticed a great collaborative attitude and a gradual increase of students' motivation and participation during the project, and the overall results show some benefits:

- students gain a higher language competence in a shorter time;
- students get a stronger awareness of the TL culture;
- students improve their language fluency;
- students are engaged in real communication;
- partner institutions get a new approach to build up a network and cooperation in language training;
- partner institutions promote intercultural dialogue;
- partner institutions share experiences.

It was also noticed that students didn't access the wiki as expected and none of them visited SL outside the sessions. This had a clear influence on the students' performance during the sessions, mainly on their lexical efficacy and language comprehension. Due to DIT's assessment weighting and syllabus design, the use of the wiki was optional and we feel the problem could be solved by designing tasks that involve the use of the wiki and further visits to the SL.

Also, technical problems had sometimes a negative effect on some sessions, causing breakdowns in communication and a certain amount of stress and waste of time. Unfortunately these are a common problem to anyone who uses CALL.

## 5. Conclusion

The experience described in this paper outlines how SL affordances can get learners in contact with authentic spoken language, increase learner's confidence, support collaborative learning with great efforts of teachers and students, and promote IC awareness and the development of ICC. As a tool of professional development, SL, in the form of a small action research study, can be very effective. It is through the process of carrying out small studies that the teacher becomes more aware of a classroom as a learning environment, and this awareness empowers the teacher to become a more effective decision maker about what goes on in the classroom.

## References

- [1] This paper is the result of the two researchers' shared reflections. The abstract and the paragraphs 1, 1.2 and 5 are written by Ms. Nocchi. The paragraphs 2, 2.1, 3 and 4 are written by Ms. Dell'Aria.
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- [7] Kim, Y. Y., 2001. *Becoming Intercultural*. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage, 86.
- [8] Café Italia is an experiment about teaching and learning Italian in SL. It has been carried out by Carmela Dell'Aria (Misy Ferraris in SL) since 2007.
- [9] <http://italianoingioco.pbworks.com/FrontPage>
- [10] The survey was developed by the tool SurveyMonkey <http://it.surveymonkey.com/>
- [11] The experience was drawn on by both researchers for their individual studies. Ms. Dell'Aria investigated the potentials of MUVES for foreign language learning, as well as the factors that impact the learners' language performance, as part of her Action Research project submitted to the University of Venice Ca' Foscari for the second level Master Itals in advanced Didactics of Italian as a Foreign Language. Ms. Nocchi analysed the experience as a pilot study, part of her PhD research on Exploring the potential of Virtual Environments to promote Intercultural Competence through the lens of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, in order to evidentiare examples of good practice and problematic areas to be addressed in developing ICC in a VW.
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- [14] A holodeck allows you to rez a large variety of rooms or scenarios in limited space <http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Holodeck>
- [15] SLOODLE (Simulation Linked Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is an Open Source project integrating Second Life® with the Moodle® learning-management system. <http://www.sloodle.org/moodle/>