5.8   Metaverse Utilization in the EFL Classroom - A Study. Second Life® as Part of an Institution's Curriculum

Metaverse Utilization in the EFL Classroom - A Study
Second Life® as Part of an Institution's Curriculum

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Abstract. Starting on April 2010, the Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages integrated the Metaverse application known as Second Life into the core curriculum for 840 new enrollments. As of April 2011, we enrolled an additional 760 students. This course, the Hybrid English Learning Program, is commonly referred to by the acronym: HELP. By taking the advantages of learning in immersive 3D environments, we aim to meet two objectives, 1) namely to enable students to remember and properly use learned phrases and expressions, and 2) using Second Life® as a tool to enhance the meaning and practicality of what is being learned. Although there have been several online English learning programs or services here in Japan, this endeavor represents the first time Metaverse technology has been utilized as part of a core curriculum; a curriculum structured upon classroom learning and interaction within the Metaverse. This paper endeavors to explain the following: the planning and development of HELP, the class structure, and the results of a questionnaire which measured whether using such an approach would reduce student timidity and assist student to gain more confidence in speaking English in different social environments.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Using metaverse applications in the learning of a foreign language has three prime benefits. First, the learner can create their own avatar to represent themselves, but at the same time shroud their true identity, allowing for anonymous interaction. Therefore those who are shy or introverted can be more active and effective speakers.

Second, role-play can easily be done allowing for many varied situations. The situations they encounter and the speaking practice they acquire in the metaverse can easily translate into real life situations. This is very important since actual conversation is not static, but dynamic, not always following a set pattern.

Third, using the metaverse, students can venture outside the walls of the classroom, study remotely, or even study along with students from other countries. In addition, this can help students acquire the skills needed to effectively communicate using other internet-related services.

Based on the benefits mentioned above, Starting on April 2010, the Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages (KIFL) integrated the metaverse known as Second Life® into the core curriculum for all new students. This course, the Hybrid English Learning Program, is commonly referred to by the acronym: HELP. At the start of the 2010 Academic year, new enrollments at KIFL totaled 840. As of April 2011, we enrolled an additional 760 students.

In this paper, we will talk about the structure of HELP and we will evaluate the results of surveys we conducted among the students. This survey primarily measured the almost psychological effect of how using an avatar alleviated the timidity that many students experience when speaking a foreign language.

2.0 PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

By taking advantage of the metaverse for use as a language learning tool, we aim to meet two main objectives, 1) namely to enable students to remember and properly use learned phrases and expressions, and 2) using Second Life as a tool to enhance the meaning and practicality of what is being learned.

Language functions primarily as a tool which accompanies us in our daily life; useful in the numerous situations we find ourselves in.

Logically, we cannot expect that students will gain practical effectiveness in speaking a foreign language if they only study the target language. Hence it is common in EFL, English as a foreign language, classrooms for students to do role-play activities, whereby they practice using the knowledge they have acquired. Undoubtedly, these activities are beneficial. However, role-play activities of this nature have some limitations.

For example, while practicing a role-play conversation, the students must imagine the setting they are acting out, which rarely captures the real sensation of the actual situation they may encounter. Moreover, the very nature of practicing with another EFL student can sometimes result in learning a rigid conversation pattern, stifling the development of natural conversational skill.

Therefore, with these limitations in mind, we have combined the classroom lesson with the metaverse. By using set dialogs and other important skill building exercises practiced in the classroom, along with metaverse activities, we created a hybrid conversation-based curriculum.

Learning English in a non-English speaking region can make it difficult for the student to perceive the practical value in their classroom lessons. By means of this integration of the traditional and the virtual, we believe we have created an environment more conducive to the overall improvement of the EFL student's practical English ability. Furthermore, when students converse and utilize the expressions and dialogs they studied in class in a virtual reality setting that copies its real-world counterpart; our hope is that they will more easily make the connection between the hypothetical and the actual.

As they see how using English helps them to accomplish various activities in the virtual world, we hope they will experience the satisfaction of finally 'getting it;' seeing the value of learning English, feeling the joy that comes with seeing their own advancement, and as a result, develop the much sought after and essential trait necessary for successful language utilization: self-confidence. We therefore hope that this hybrid method will become an alternative way for foreign language acquisition.

3.0 CLASS STRUCTURE

The entire course curriculum is an integration of three essential components; each component being the fusion of two elements: 1) the utilization of the classroom and the virtual online world of Second Life, 2) the collaboration and class oversight by Japanese and native English instructors, and 3) the combination of traditional learning styles and amusing activities. Below is an outline of the actual course procedure.

(1) In the classroom, Japanese instructors teach and explain to the students the English conversation dialogs (phrases, expressions, grammar structure, improvisation techniques) and cultural background essentials.

(2) In the metaverse setting, native English teachers converse with students via their avatars. This in-game experience mimics the real world and persuades the students to use what they have learned in order to progress through the given scenario.

(3) Review and discussion of student's Second Life in-game experiences.

4.0 ANONYMITY

4.1 Shyness

For students who are studying a foreign language (for example: English) in a non-native environment (such as Japan), the key element that they need to master their studies is having a setting where they can practice their speaking and listening skills; helping them to build adequate fluency, memorization, and improvisation. Therefore in the typical EFL classroom, role-play activities are

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essential. Students stand in front of the classroom and practice the target dialog or situation with another student.

However, many students feel a bit shy in doing such role-play before the class. In addition, since they are speaking with a fellow Japanese student they feel somewhat or even highly embarrassed to speak English with them. This situation can sometimes hinder the effectiveness of said role-play activities among Japanese students.

4.2 When Does Timidity Manifest Itself?

In 2005, Reference [1] the book, *Shuuchishin ha Doko he Kieta? (Where Does Timidity Go?)*, written by Sugawara contained a study concerning shyness in Japanese society. It said that amongst the Japanese timidity is based on one's familiarity with the person they are interacting with. The study showed that with the Japanese, interestingly, they do not feel particularly shy when interacting with close friends or family, nor with complete strangers.

Timidity and Familiarity
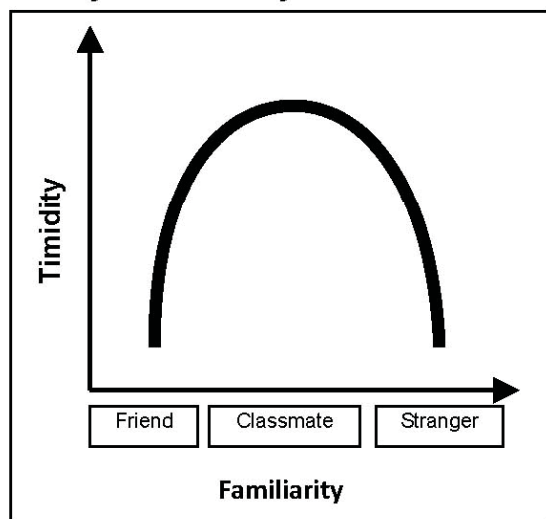
However, the Japanese as a whole feel extremely timid when interacting with people they know, but who are not their friends, for example, their classmates, colleagues, or neighbors. When interacting with such individuals many Japanese hesitate to express themselves or engage in more than just simple small talk.

4.3 ANONYMITY

As mentioned, since the Japanese feel shy in certain social circles, it is understandable why many desire anonymity when using internet communication services.

Facebook©, the world's most popular SNS, as of May 27, 2011 boasted having some 3,480,000 accounts in Japan. However Facebook is not the most popular SNS in Japan, mixi© is. In Japan, as of April 14, 2010 mixi was reported to have some 20,000,000 user accounts.

There is a big difference between these two competing social networking sites. Facebook strongly suggests that is users create accounts using their real names. However, mixi allows its users to create accounts using only nicknames. Therefore, due to the anonymity that mixi allows, many Japanese feel more comfortable using this SNS rather than Facebook.

Reference [2], the survey done by Mobile Marketing Data Labo was reported on April 6th, 2011.

In the below table, people were asked how they identify themselves when using social media services. Only 23 percent of the users of mixi had made their real names public. In contrast, on Facebook, some 84.3 percent of its users make their real names public on that social network.

The three major social media websites (mixi, Twitter, Facebook)
The level which users share real information

	Facebook	Twitter	mixi
sharing a real name, school, or company name	49.0%	9.4%	11.1%
sharing only a real name	35.3%	13.6%	11.9%
using a nickname that your friend would know	7.1%	43.1%	56.2%
using a name	4.9%	27.9%	18.1%

that no one would know for anonymity purposes			
other	3.7%	6.0%	2.7%

By looking at both of these surveys objectively we can confidently say that when using online services, anonymity is very important to the Japanese as it helps them to communicate better.

4.4 Avatar as a Physiological Mask
By taking advantage of the "anonymity" or the detachment from self, a mindset commonly experienced while using avatars in a virtual setting, we hope to reduce the level of anxiety and embarrassment peculiar to the Japanese when speaking in a foreign language.

5.0 QUESTIONNARIES

5.1 Questionnaire Overview
The purpose of this research is to provide insights into the Hybrid English Learning Program's effectiveness in using Second Life by revealing the positive and negative aspects of it from the perspective of current students. In the survey, we included questions regarding each student's country of citizenship, English language proficiency level, and overseas experience.

In addition, questions measured student experience in English communication in real life as well as in Second Life. The questions focused on whether using an avatar to converse in English helped them to overcome shyness and embarrassment or not. Our hope was that by their responses we could accurately determine that using said avatars in Second Life would help English learners overcome cultural barriers to speak English with more confidence.

5.1 The Questionnaire Participants
The target population for this study was our current first-year and second-year students enrolled in HELP. The total number of those able to take the survey was 785.

5.3 Questionnaire Procedure
On KIFL INFOWEB, our vocation school's internet website which student access to receive general school information and other important information peculiar to HELP, a questionnaire form was created for use by the HELP students. The participating students were asked to fill out the questionnaire as honestly as possible.

5.5 Questionnaire Period
From July 6, 2011 to July 12, 2011

5.6 Data Analysis
The 785 students who responded to this survey came from more than six countries. The majority of respondents, 95 percent, were Japanese citizens. 2 percent came from China and 1 percent from South Korea. 476 first-year students, 61 percent, and 309 second-year students, 39 percent, responded to this survey. 44 percent of respondents had spent less than one month abroad, and 39percent of respondents had never been overseas.

After identifying themselves in this way, the next questions assessed ways to overcome the barrier of shyness when speaking the English language in real life and in a virtual reality environment. When we analyzed 785 students' responses using agree-disagree questioning methods, there were significant differences in overcoming the language barrier of shyness in speaking English through avatars and in speaking English in real life (see Table 1-1).

The survey included twelve questions for overcoming shyness in speaking English. There were no significant differences in speaking their native language with strangers classmates, teachers, or friends in real life or in Second Life. The data shows that most students do not feel shy to speak their native languages.

According to the survey results, See Table 1-1), 46 percent of students feel shy to speak in English with strangers, and 53 percent do not feel shy to speak with strangers in real life. Through an avatar, 69 percent of students indicate that they "somewhat disagree" and "totally disagree" with being shy about communicating with strangers in Second Life.

The virtual environment is one significant way to overcome their language barriers of shyness. Also, 66 percent of students "somewhat disagree" and "totally disagree" with being shy about communicating with teachers in the real-life setting. Through an avatar, 71 percent of students "somewhat disagree" and "totally disagree" with being shy about communicating with teachers in virtual reality. Thus, the virtual-reality environment has played an important role in aiding students to overcome the language barrier of shyness in speaking the English language.

Another important finding is that fear of embarrassment is one of the negative factors in overcoming the barrier of shyness. 60 percent of students indicate that they "totally agree" and "somewhat agree" that they fear embarrassment if they make a mistake while speaking English with strangers in the real-life setting. Through avatars, 59 percent of students do not feel embarrassed when they make a mistake while speaking English with strangers in virtual reality. On the other hand, 58 percent of students indicate that they "somewhat disagree" and "totally disagree" that they fear embarrassment when speaking English with teachers in real life. Through avatars, 68 percent of students do not feel embarrassed if they speak English with teachers in virtual reality. The data indicates that through avatars, most students do not feel embarrassed when speaking English with classmates as well as friends. Communication in English in the virtual setting may help students overcome the language barrier of shyness and the fear of embarrassment.

Table1-1
Shyness in Real Life versus Shyness in Second Life

	Conversation in the Real Life		Conversation in Second Life	
	"Totally agree" and "Somewhat agree"	"Somewhat disagree" and "Totally disagree"	"Totally agree" and "Somewhat agree"	"Somewhat disagree" and "Totally disagree"
1. Do you feel shy to speak your native language with strangers?	23%	77%	13%	87%
2. Do you feel shy to speak your native language with teachers?	16%	84%	11%	89%
3. Do you feel shy to speak your native language with classmates?	12%	88%	12%	88%
4. Do you feel shy to speak your native language with friends?	9%	91%	10%	90%
5. Do you feel shy to speak English with strangers?	46%	54%	32%	68%
6. Do you feel shy to speak English with teachers?	28%	72%	29%	71%
7. Do you feel shy to speak English with classmates?	35%	65%	22%	78%
8. Do you feel shy to speak English with friends?	25%	75%	21%	79%
9. Do you feel embarrassed if you make a mistake while speaking English with strangers?	60%	40%	41%	59%
10. Do you feel embarrassed if you make a mistake while speaking English with teachers?	42%	58%	32%	68%

11. Do you feel embarrassed if you make a mistake while speaking English with classmates?	41%	59%	37%	63%
12. Do you feel embarrassed if you make a mistake while speaking English with friends?	36%	64%	29%	71%

6.0 CONCLUSION

According to the data, student survey responses indicate that in many cases communication in English through avatars leads students to overcome the language barrier of timidity and the fear of embarrassment when speaking English with strangers, teachers, classmates, and friends. This positive effect on the students leads us to the conclusion that metaverse applications and the use of avatars in the EFL classroom makes for an improved language learning curriculum.

7.0 APPENDICES
HELP Online Questionnaire Survey

Conversation in Real Life

1. Do you sometimes feel shy when speaking your native language with the following people?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

2. Do you feel shy to speak English with the following people?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

3. When you make a mistake while speaking English, do you feel embarrassed?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

Conversation through Avatars (Virtual Reality/Second Life®)

4. When communicating through an avatar, do you feel shy to speak your native language with the following people?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

5. When communicating through an avatar, do you feel shy to speak English with the following people?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

6. When communicating through an avatar, do you feel embarrassed if you make a mistake while speaking English with the following people?

	Totally agree	Some what agree	Somewh at disagree	Totally disagre e
With strangers				
With teachers				
With classmates, etc				
With friends				

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[1] Sugawara, Kensuke, *Shuuchishin ha Doko he Kieta?,* Kobunsha Publication, 2005.

[2] *The three major social media websites (mixi, Twitter, Facebook)The level which users share real information* , MOBILE MARKETING DATA LABO, 2011. http://mmd.up-date.ne.jp/news/detail.php?news_id=784 (Accessed on July 15, 2011).