

The Impact Of Role-Playing Games Through *Second Life* On The Oral Practice of Linguistic And Discursive Sub-Competences In English

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Abstract: This paper describes a case study, carried out in an educational setting, whose purpose includes the analysis of the impact that role-playing games (RPGs), with the mediation of the immersive virtual environment *Second Life*, causes in the oral practice of linguistic and discursive communicative sub-competences in English. It is discussed an interdisciplinary participation of the communicative approach of languages, the technologies involved in the development of this study, RPGs and task-based learning. The study outlines the phases that make up the experience, the categories of analysis addressed from the triangulation of data collected, and finally the conclusions and future research.

Keywords: *Role Playing Games, virtual immersion, Second Life, English, communicative skills, task-based learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

When language learning is delivered through a distance education or a b-learning program, the efforts are channeled into combining technical and interdisciplinary strategies in their linguistic, pedagogical and technological sense.

Distance education proposes a set of instructional methods that are characterized taking into account the separation of the environment of teaching and learning. The teaching is planned and developed in a different space and place of learning. What links these two environments are the phenomena of dialogue (which is carried out by technological devices tend to favor the interaction), the structure of the proposal, and study materials [1].

This study is developed through the distance education model in a virtual space that seeks to: contribute to the enhancement of the oral ability in English by integrating various multimedia formats in order to serve as motivational and functional precursor of simulated experiences.

This educational experience leaves the one-way relationship between teachers and learners aside, and builds a two-way relationship that contributes to the education of both of them, since they have meaningful elements that enrich the educational process [2].

Precisely, such bidirectional relationship is evident in the encounter between students and teachers of English in several

simulated and handpicked scenarios in the 3D virtual world called *Second Life*. Thus, it is set communicative tasks that students carried out through role playing in English.

Some previous studies have served as motivation for this work such as Escobar, Sanz, and Zangara [3] and Warburton [4] where a review of the possibilities and barriers of SL for the educational scenario was carried out.

The need to deepen the possibilities of this environment in the area of English in general became evident, and particularly the development of communicative practices through role playing.

The problem addressed in this article focuses on creating role-playing activities in English that reflect the surrounding reality of the student, engaging them in artificial scenarios that simulate a situation of the world-wide reality that they face today for them to put into practice their oral skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous work related to the use of SL to teach and practice English

In recent years, studies on *Second Life* have delved into the modus operandi of the teaching and practice of the English language in this virtual world, in this way, a varied of educational experiences have released with the aim of focusing on providing meaningful learning in the target language.

One of these studies was carried out by Mendez [5], who proposed building a virtual community of practice to promote an immersive learning of English and collaborative work. Among the exercises for students in this community, there are contests and communicative situations to promote knowledge creation and skills development through various activities carried out in the virtual exchange.

A second research, led by Wang et al [6], describes the integration of SL into an EFL program, where Chinese students interact with American students through synchronously discussions on different topics.

Once the experience was concluded and analyzed, some suggestions raised to facilitate students' language performance and scaffold their language learning in SL; were: 1) prepare

students for task completion, 2) set a time limit for any given task 3) closely monitor student language performance 4) encourage post-task reflection, and 5) provide feedback.

Another research [7], on using SL in an English course validates the importance of combining careful instructional design with ongoing assessment when implementing emerging technologies. For this study two activities were done, the first one was the building of an ideal campus in SL, and the second one was a role playing activity.

Students said that the second activity was more engaging and more relevant to the course content, also it generates more enjoyment, the directions were clearer, and it's a better learning experience than the building activity. These results show how important is keep in mind students' skills and learning needs in using Second Life.

In comparison with previous work, this study:

- may be part of a community of practice of English, since it can be incorporated along with other educational activities, even more, it enriches those that already existed.
- did not have native participants in the target language; however it is feasible due to, in the communicative tasks, the roles are clearly described to be played for any participant.
- follows the five suggestions provided by Wang et al [6] to scaffold students' language learning in SL.
- takes into account the needs and skills of students, as this is the basis for successful results.

B. The communicative competence

In the early seventies, socio-linguist and anthropologist Hymes [8] coined the term "communicative competence", developing key concepts for understanding what such competence involves, for instance the indissoluble link between the grammatical and sociocultural factors, noting that both come from the same parent.

The author analyzes the previous fact to explain how a child not only learns the formal system of the language, but also learns to decide when and when not to speak, what to talk about, with whom, where and how.

While the communicative competence encompasses a broad set of sub-competences and components that form a synergy all together, the present research focuses on two sub-competences specifically; the linguistic and discursive one.

1) Linguistic and discursive sub-competences

To measure the linguistic and discursive sub-competences in students, it is necessary to know the parameters under which it is possible to indicate the level of proficiency they have.

Therefore, the evaluative parameters designed by international institutions, recognized for their investigative work in the field of foreign languages, are the ones that provide accurate data regarding how a student performs when practicing his target language.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment [9], and the International English Language Testing System [10] served as guides to create evaluative parameters.

The linguistic sub-competence is defined as the capacity to process information from a system of symbols, in order to identify the phonological, syntactic and semantic use with efficiency [11]. The components that belong to this sub-competence, and are discussed in detail in this study, are: the lexicon, the syntax and the pronunciation.

Regarding the discursive sub-competence, it is distinguished when relations between the propositions expressed orally and textually present a semantic continuity revealing logical ideas, understandable to the interlocutors. Thus, this sub-competence analyzes how an individual organizes the sentences in sequences to produce consistent fragments in a language.

The discursive components that are considered in this study are: the coherence, the cohesion and the cooperative principle.

2) The oral skill

Aliakbari and Jamalvandi [12] show the difficulty of orality in relation to writing in a foreign language in terms of the preparation time for each one, since talking does not give the advantage of reviewing in detail what is going to be said, this leads to the fact that the speaker is forced to think as quickly as possible. Consequently, language teachers are constantly seeking new tactics to promote more emphasis on the oral skills, not only in the classroom but also outside it, where the performance of technological resources comes to play a substantial role to allow students to practice their oral skill in their own space and desired pace.

To itemize the study and achieve balanced results, this research focuses solely on oral skill.

C. Second Life as a virtual world in Education

Second Life was founded as a metaverse in June 2003 by Philip Rosedale in conjunction with the company Linden Lab. This metaverse is a virtual world in 3D, immersive and a multi-user environment, which is a gathering place to perform activities of different nature namely political, economic, religious, scientific, cultural and educational. In the latter, SL has had an undeniable impact by serving as a pedagogical and technological bridge between the learner and the object of study.

In this regard, current studies suggest the advantages of SL in education to consider this metaverse as a promoter to develop social skills and problem solving that encourages teamwork and promotes critical thinking [13].

Meanwhile, Warburton [4] identifies eight components of SL that facilitate innovations in the field of education. They are: enriching interactions, visualization and contextualisation, authentic content and culture, identity games, immersion in a 3D environment, simulation, presence of community and content production.

To get the most educational benefit of virtual worlds like SL, SLED (Second Life Education) was created, where a community of educators worldwide share their experiences through forums, blogs, FAQs, videos, educational stories and lists of educational institutions present in SL.

Since 2007, when SL introduced a voice system, the field of foreign language training has expanded with great consideration, as this new tool promoted the creation of virtual scenarios reassessing the development of the skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading.

Zhang [14], in his case study about the pedagogical challenges of spoken English learning in Second Life, found nine difficulties that learners face in this virtual world and in the same way nine tactics to counteract such problems. For instance, the first one is related to the distracting factors that some places have, such as unexpected violent or sexual content and inappropriate behavior by some users.

To avoid distracting factors such as those mentioned, Zhang recommended to search and choose in advance more than a place to carry out the activities, also work hand in hand with the owner of one place to create a private group and restrict the entry of other people, or finally buy and build a proper place for the group.

D. Role-Playing Games (RPGs) in Education

The RPGs demand that participants adopt heterogeneous perspectives from their role while, along with others, constantly enrich the imaginary events. For this reason, these games have been considered in recent times to be highly dynamic and effective resources in education that motivate and greatly promote teamwork [15]

Regarding the taxonomic role-playing approach indicated by Roda [16], they are classified into four main categories, namely: RPGs table games, live action RPGs, writing RPGs and role-playing video game.

The last category can be given in two modes: offline and online. In the second mode, people play with connection to the Internet, facilitating the meeting of a large number of participants in MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) and MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games).

A software created as virtual world, but sometimes used for role-playing video games, is Second Life, which, according to its creators (Linden Lab), it is not a role-playing game itself as it has no ultimate objectives established, nor is it designed to promote competition, or follow pre-established rules as happens in the video games.

RPGs in SL are configured as a safe practice where participants engage in various simulated conditions, whose usefulness lies in being able to err repeatedly without the fear of facing the consequences that such errors could result in real life [17].

These attributes can reach further pursued in collaboration with various virtual scenarios as SL. In the destination guide on the website of SL, there are a lot of communities dedicated

to RPGs, whose topics are about: vampires, steampunk, fantasy, historical, pirates, science fiction and urban.

RPGs specifically designed for the development of oral skills in English were not found in Second Life. However, there are SL communities, such as *Learn it Town* and *Virtlantis* that offer conversation clubs in different languages with natives, in order to promote the development of the communicative skills.

Also, projects like *Leo Network* (Learn English Online) and *Avatar Languages* offer virtual English classes for free with a variety of activities including role playing. Both of them invite students to have some sessions in the virtual world SL, which provide a wide range of regions, extending the real-world into the virtual world.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study discusses the benefits and limitations of RPGs as existing dynamic in the development of the linguistic and discursive oral sub-competences in English, in a contemporary context, which is particularly virtual and in 3D. Specifically Second Life was chosen as representative of this type of environment. Therefore, the research question is:

What is the impact of role-playing games through Second Life on the oral practice of linguistic and discursive sub-competences in English?

To answer the research question above, a multiple case study approach was used, involving ten students in seven role-playing virtual sessions, each one configured as a case, leading to a constant analysis of the dynamics of each session to explain the contribution that the RPGs, in SL as the virtual scenario, generate in the oral communicative practice of two specific sub-competences.

Also, the Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was used as an educational framework to design communicative tasks for the role-playing sessions with a clear description to guide students' performance.

A. Data collection: techniques and instruments

The data collection includes three techniques with different instruments:

1) *Participant observation*: In this form of participation, the researcher was not a passive observer [18]. On the contrary, the researcher studied the case from within the social group and was directly involved in each session taking the role of host avatar, but with an average degree of participation to make students' contribution stand out.

During the participant observation three instruments were used: a screencast recording of each session, an evaluation rubric for each of the linguistic and discursive components with descriptors for five evaluation levels: excellent, very good, good, needs improvement and unsatisfactory, and valuation matrices.

These instruments allowed the researcher to analyze the performance of each student from the teacher's point of view.

2) *Interviews*: in a scenario in SL, a semi-structured interview was conducted, where the researcher prepared a set

of questions for delineating the path of the conversation, however, some of the answers of the interviewees led to new questions not previously planned.

A screencast recording was used as an instrument, whose purpose was to examine the performance and student's perception from the point of view of the participants.

3) *Survey*: Both open and closed questions were raised by a communication entirely online, using "Google forms" as instrument, which also help to analyze the performance and student's perception from the point of view of the participants.

B. Field work

The following are the phases carried out during the field work.

1) *Phase 1: Profile and selection of participants*

The participants were 10 voluntary students over 18 years old with an intermediate English level that belong to the Language Center of the National Pedagogical University of Colombia, located in Bogota City. The field work was carried out over a period of seven weeks between the months of June and July 2015.

Three pre-tests were done to evaluate the students' previous English skills; the first one by the students' English teacher, the second one by the researcher and the last one was a self-evaluation.

The evaluations showed a low intermediate level in the oral skill, with some difficulties in pronunciation and fluency.

2) *Phase 2: Development of communicative tasks, choice of scenarios and design SL Wiki "Second Life Role Play"*

Seven communicative tasks for the RPGs (one per session) were devised. Each task includes:

- Name: It is given the task's name.
- Location: It is given the virtual location where the role play session will be carried out.
- Roles: The role each resident performs during the sessions is described.
- Objective: It is shown the task's final purpose.
- Task description: The situation in which the participants are involved is described. The participation depends on the assigned role, that is to say, participants need to keep in mind the role's description and according to this they are required to put into practice the use of the language, lexical and functional focuses.
- Language Focus: it is given the linguistic elements you have to focus on and use during the session.
- Lexical Focus: it is given the vocabulary elements you have to focus on and use during the session.
- Functional Focus: it is given the functional elements you have to focus on and use during the session.

With the purpose of making the most of the plurality of scenarios that can be found in SL and that offer a great

diversity of elements to interact, seven scenarios were chosen and classified as "general" or "moderate" to provide a pleasant and comfortable environment for the RPGs according to the tasks' objective. Also, the chosen scenarios were the ones where the microphone tool was not blocked and with low level of visitors to avoid interruptions during the sessions.

A wiki was created on the website *wikispaces* as a resource for: 1) having an asynchronous communication in which participants were shown the steps for registration in SL, creating avatars and using basic tools of multimedia, 2) presenting and describing oral communication tasks to be carried out in each role play, 3) and giving feedback after each session in relation to linguistic and discursive aspects evidenced in the recording sessions.

3) *Phase 3: Immersion in Second Life*

The first immersion in SL had as objective students' readiness to participate in the virtual world, and then a pilot test was completed. Afterwards, seven sessions were achieved.

The following were the sessions' names: 1) Mystery Unsolved Crimes. 2) Inspectors Visit Animal Welfare. 3) Vacation in a Resort. 4) Investing in an Amusement Park. 5) Maternity and Infants Center. 6) Tour guided by the EAN University, School of Business Administration. 7) Purchasing Prefab Dream.

4) *Phase 4: Second Life interview*

Participants were interviewed individually in SL. Interviews lasted between 8 to 16 minutes (see Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Interview in Second Life with the avatar "Molly"

5) *Phase 5: Survey*

The survey was divided into the following six sections:

a. The first called "Wiki: role play Second Life" seeks to understand the role of the wiki in the communication process with the participants.

b. The second called "Role playing in English learning" aims to distinguish students' perceptions regarding the use of the strategy RPGs in the development of the oral proficiency in English.

c. The third was "Second Life: the 3d virtual world", which evaluates SL as a virtual learning tool.

d. The fourth called "Role playing in Second Life and the oral ability in English" focuses on the perceptions of the participants about the impact of the RPGs through SL in the oral practice of English.

e. The fifth was “Participants’ performance”, which distinguishes the performance of both the participants and the host avatar.

f. The last section of the survey shows additional comments on the experience.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

After each session, the researcher completed an evaluation rubric for each student. It was analyzed along with the data collected in the interviews and surveys. The results were divided into two categories:

1) Results related to the performance of each student in SL based on participant observations.

Data on participants’ linguistic and discursive competence was collected through screencast recording and participant observation journals for each of the seven role-play games. Thus, the performance of each student was evidenced in the valuation matrices. For example, Fig. 2 shows the valuation matrix of a student whose avatar’s name was “Natha”. The graph depicts the student’s performance for each component throughout seven sessions.

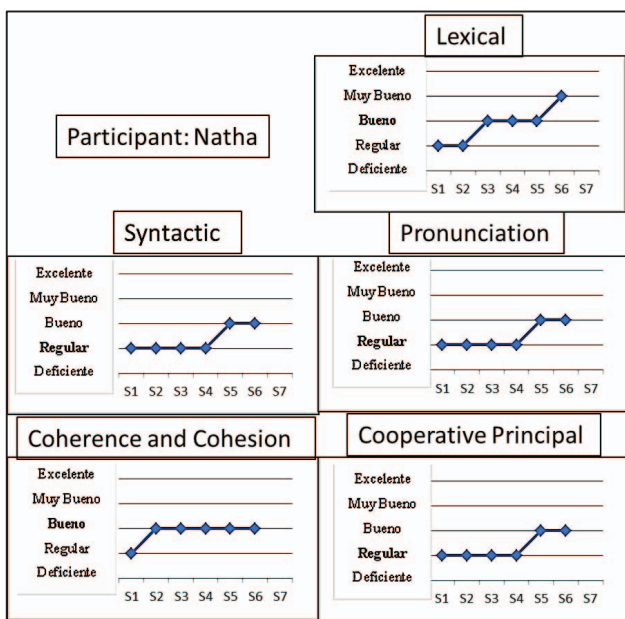


Figure 2. Valuation matrix of one of the participants' performance in the components throughout the seven sessions

When comparing the valuation matrices of each participant from session to session students showed an improvement from the first to the last session. The following observations were noticed for each component:

- Lexical component:** during the sessions it was observed how the participants incorporated vocabulary taken from their prior knowledge and some of them also used that indicated in the communicative tasks.
- Syntactic component:** this experience encouraged participants to find and use those linguistic structures constituents of their prior knowledge.

- Component of the pronunciation:** this activity contributes to the continuous improvement of pronunciation as evidenced by how careful the participants were when expressing their opinions.
- Component of the coherence and cohesion:** throughout the sessions an improvement was observed in the organization and distribution of oral ideas in a logical and systematic way, so that the interlocutor was able to clearly understand the message that the participants wanted to convey. As the participants felt more comfortable in each session, they demonstrated a good command of connectors to link ideas properly at the moment of their interventions.
- Component of the cooperative principal:** the students’ contributions were increasingly informative, and the messages were relevant according to the role they had in the role-playing games. In the last sessions, participants displayed an effective cooperation in the dialogues by taking turns to talk and listen to each other.
- Results related to the performance and perception of each student in SL analyzed through interviews and surveys.**

Educators and researchers have identified categories regarding the educational use of Second Life [4, 19, 20], which match with the educational benefits that the participants point out about the development of RPGs in Second Life. Some of such perceptions can be noted in Table 1.

TABLE 1. STUDENTS’ PERCEPTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RPGS IN SECOND LIFE

Theoretical framework	Categories	Participants’ comments from interviews and surveys
Warburton, 2009	Visualizati on and contextuali sation	<i>“This virtual world is an imaginary world where you can do a lot of things that you can’t do in the real world. You could do activities which you would like to do in the real world. For example, fly, be a different person, wear crazy clothes, visit strange places, live as a rich person, among others”</i>
Henderson et al, 2009	Affective filters (the user is "covered" by his avatar)	<i>"When you face a situation sometimes people are shy to talk but this is a way to improve English because you do not see the real person. Then you can say whatever you want and share your ideas"</i>
Pereira, J, 2008. The AVALON project	Existence of simulated spaces	<i>"The places are good because they were completely different and helped us make the role play because we were in context"</i>

Through surveys, the participants were asked to what extent they as participants felt that the RPGs in SL had contributed to the components of the lexicon, the syntax, the

pronunciation, the coherence, the cohesion and the principle of cooperation.

For the lexical component, Fig. 3 shows that for 10% the contribution was in a very high extent, for 70% in a high extent and for 20% in a moderate extent. What demonstrates the existence of a positive impact of the role-playing games through SL for practicing vocabulary.

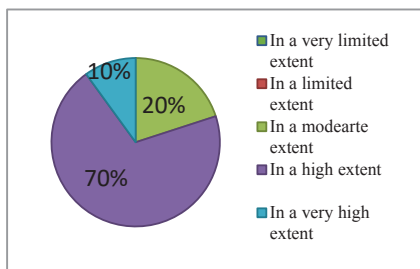


Figure 3. Perception of the lexical component

For syntactic component, Fig. 4 shows that 70 % responded that the contribution was in a high extent, 20% said it was in a moderate extent and 10% in a limited extent. These results show that for a large percentage of students, role-playing games in SL had a favorable impact on the practice of syntax.

Regarding the component of pronunciation, the responses indicated in Fig. 5 confirm once again a positive perception, since for 40% there is a very high contribution, for another 40 % it is high and for 20% it is moderate.

For the component of coherence the responses indicate (see Fig. 6) that for a 20% the contribution was very high, for a 50% it was high, for another 20 % it was moderate and for 10% it was limited.

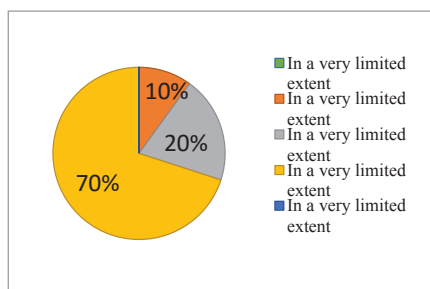


Figure 4. Perception of the syntactic component

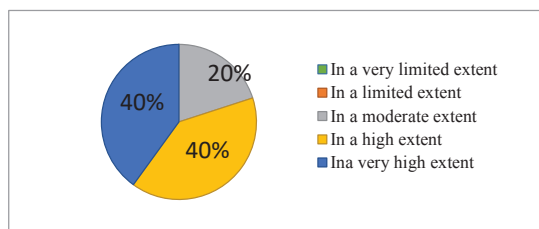


Figure 5. Perception of the component of pronunciation

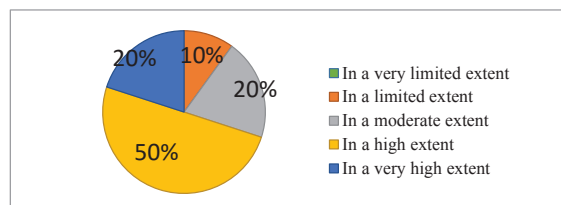


Figure 6. Perception of the component of coherence

As for the component of cohesion, 7 of the 10 participants gave a high rating, considering that these games in SL influence positively when it is about using connectors to link logical ideas that create cohesive messages. In addition, the remaining 3 participants gave a moderate rating (see Fig. 7).

With respect to the above components, the component of the principle of cooperation had the highest percentage, with 50 % in the "very high" rating, followed by 30% who perceive that the contribution is given in a high degree, for a 10% in a moderate and for the last 10% as a limited extent (see Fig. 8)

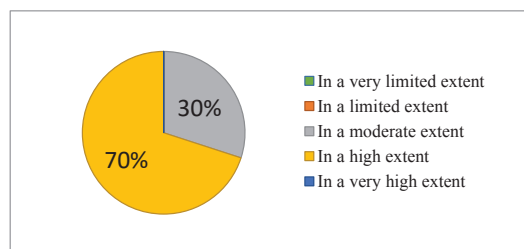


Figure 7. Perception of the component of cohesion

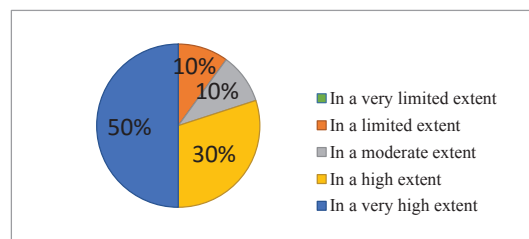


Figure 8. Perception of the component of principle of cooperation

According to the above figures, the "high" and "very high" levels stand out. This shows satisfactory results for the RPGs in SL for the practice of linguistic and discursive sub-competences.

V. CONTRIBUTION AND CONCLUSIONS

This case study has led to a series of contributions that generate interest to language teachers, to researchers in the area of computer technology applied in education and to the educational community in general:

- The design of communicative tasks that may be used and adapted by other educators and learners.
- Selection criteria for favorable scenarios for role-playing games within Second Life.

- The study itself as an enriching experience in validating Second Life to conduct RPGs.

From the results indicated in the previous section, where the performance and perception of each student on the RPGs in SL were analyzed by means of the participant observation, the interviews and the surveys, along with the valuation matrices, and considering the impact of role-playing games through Second Life in the oral practice of linguistic and discursive sub-competences in English, it is possible to deduce that this type of experiences is understood, in general, as a favorable practice for the development of the oral proficiency of students.

However, the study also demonstrates that both teachers and students require specific pedagogical and technological skills and knowledge; such as those referenced by Escobar et al [3].

The perception of participants, regarding their language practice through this activity, has been favorable in general, what is seen as a positive aspect because it is important that students analyze their progress by taking an active role in these kinds of activities.

Participants expressed that the impact of role-playing games in SL in particular helped them to:

- challenge their performance in the use of linguistic and discursive components.
- participate with avatars covertly, which favored the process of lack of inhibition.
- strive in their pronunciation because as they were not able to see the real person's body language, they had to make a big effort to make their ideas as clear as possible just by their orality.
- strive to communicate in the most possible natural way.
- communicate more spontaneously, thanks to the unique context represented in SL.

This tested teaching and learning process generated a beneficial experience with the purpose of being optimized in the field of foreign languages.

To achieve such experience, reference and empirical interdisciplinary frameworks were conjugated, whose models and concepts made it possible to corroborate that mediation systems as SL, with concrete pedagogical frameworks such as the task-based learning and the RPGs teaching strategy, achieve significantly impact on the practice of a target language.

It is worth remembering, however, that even though the impact of role-playing games through Second Life in the oral practice is useful by itself, it also largely depends on the organization and follow up of the educational process, since the existence of the mere synergy of pedagogical and technological elements is not sufficient to obtain good results. Instead, the teacher, in his role as counselor and facilitator, designs and transforms these elements according to the social and cultural characteristics that each group of students possess.

The graphs represented in the descriptive valuation matrices, designed from participant observation and further analysis, are configured as a solid indicator of the influence that the immersion on SL had in improving the linguistic and discursive oral level of participants' sub-competences.

Considering the issues mentioned above, it is clear to contemplate Second Life as a mediator and distinctive communicative tool in action thanks to its own peculiarities: 1) the diversity of scenarios similar to real life, 2) the creation and manipulation of objects, 3) the three dimensional environment which enables users to experience attractive virtual activities, 4) the creation of identities by hiding behind avatars, and 5) the existence of a variety of multimedia tools and communicative channels.

The previous peculiarities lead to a synergy that:

- involves students in situations as close as the proposed RPGs.
- stimulates the development of oral communication by providing a particular context that induces students to enhance their speech in English.
- is configured as a unique opportunity for interaction that requires oral scaffolding.
- leads students to make an effort to contribute to the dialogue as better as possible, since they neither knew each other in real life nor the avatar had enough gestures to help the oral communication.

One limitation of this study needs to be stated. Because of practical constraints, the study was conducted among a fairly small group of target students.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Regarding the use of SL as a mediator between students and teachers in the practice of a target language from the experiment carried out, the following are suggestions for future research proposals:

- Expanding the sample to extend the conclusions of this work.
- Conducting a study on the diversity of activities that can be developed through virtual worlds like SL for practicing a foreign language.
- Describing the impact of the use of virtual worlds as SL in the practice of skills such as reading, listening and writing in a foreign language.
- Deepening the educational contribution of the existing communities in SL for teaching a foreign language.

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