

Promoting Learner Autonomy through Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract

The recent developments in educational technologies have given opportunity to the application of contemporary approaches like learning autonomy in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. In addition, the diverse open and distance learning environments have provided freedom for foreign language learners to reach multiple sources of knowledge. More specifically, by diversifying and enlarging the foreign language learning and teaching choices for teachers, course designers and learners the Internet and virtual learning environments cater for greater learning opportunities. However, the knowledge which booms and is spreading very fast with the support of learning webs, emerging multimedia and virtual learning environments multiplies and diversifies constantly. These also require learners to choose among the knowledge to be acquired, select resources and channels for learning and take proactive responsibility in learning. The immersive nature of 3D virtual learning environments like the Second Life may provide many new opportunities like authentic communication, cooperative creation of content, multiple modes of information processing in the context of foreign language learning. In the scope of this paper, the opportunities provided by the 3D virtual world platform Second Life to facilitate the learner autonomy in the process of foreign language learning will be discussed.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Learner Autonomy, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), Second Life

1. Introduction

The current upheavals at educational technologies have necessitated the innovation in foreign language teaching and learning and in compliance with these the application of new approaches. For instance, the development of open and distance instructional technologies has made the topics such as learner autonomy be mentioned more often in the field of foreign language learning. The Internet and virtual learning environments diversify and enlarge the foreign language learning opportunities for course designers, teachers and learners and thus change the learning experience. In addition, the information boom that is supported by the learning webs such as the Internet and virtual learning environments has multiplied and diversified the knowledge that learners are to learn. These require learners to choose the knowledge to learn, become autonomous in that sense and take proactive responsibility in the learning process. In the scope of this paper, learner autonomy will be presented, and then the opportunities provided by the virtual world platform Second Life to facilitate the learner autonomy in the process of

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foreign language learning will be discussed. Thus, the questions to be answered in this paper will be as follows:

- 1) How is learner autonomy defined in the field of foreign language learning?
- 2) What are the opportunities that the three dimensional (3-D) virtual learning environments (VLEs) bring into the foreign language learning field?
- 3) How the three dimensional (3-D) virtual learning environments such as the Second Life (SL) may contribute in the promotion of learner autonomy in the foreign language learning field?

2. Learner Autonomy

Since the 1970's the work and views of researchers like Freire, Ilich and Rogers have been influencing the field of foreign language learning by postulating on learner-centeredness. Focusing on the learner has brought about the idea of choice and responsibility of the learner in the learning process. This has been reflected in the field of foreign language learning as learner autonomy which have been also supported by the European Council of European Union by the Modern Languages Project. Furthermore, the information boom that is also backed by the development of instructional technologies has multiplied and diversified the knowledge that the learners should learn. Also the open and distance learning technologies have made the idea of learning autonomy inevitable. The further support for learner autonomy has been brought by the constructivist approach which was developed through the views of Dewey, Piaget, Freire, Kelly and Vygotsky (Benson, 2001, pp. 8-40) and the idea of lifelong learning.

The initial research about learner autonomy was pursued on the adults who did not have much time to sit in the classes and was considered as one of the radical educational views. According to Dickinson (1987), "*learners in the classrooms could be autonomous in both cognitive and behaviourist manner*" and Dam (1995) adds that "*learner autonomy should be implemented in the secondary education*" as well (in Benson 2006a p. 22). Little (1991, pp. 48-57) believes that learner autonomy is not a completely independent study but is shaped by the "*interdependence*" principle. To him, autonomous learning process is to be realized through teacher-student negotiation, interaction and problem solving, students learn only the content that they choose themselves and feel responsible for, and teachers should trust their students.

Learner autonomy is extensively being used in the context of foreign language learning, today. However, the definition of learner autonomy has been put forward in many ways according to the context it has been used. Holec (2007, p. 12) defines autonomy as "*an ability which enables learners to take charge of one's own responsibility in learning*", Little (1991, p. 24) as "*the learners psychological relation with the learning process and content*", Dickinson as "*learners responsibility to make decisions in*

the learning process and the implementation of these decisions”, and Benson (2006b, p. 8) as “*the learners’ awareness of their rights in the learning process*”. Given the varying definitions it is observed that learning autonomy is a kind of individual quality and educational act.

Oxford (2008, p. 49) postulates that especially the western view of autonomy reflects “*agency, locus of control, attribution of outcomes and self-efficacy*”. Agency means the situation in which the person is the origin of behaviour and has an effect on outcomes, locus of control refers to control of both internal and external conditions, attribution is a personal trait which means that a person can be autonomous, and self-efficacy is the feeling which enables learners to have confidence in achieving any learning task or activity. All of these refer to individuality, however learners are experiencing the learning process in sociocultural contexts where they are supported in cooperation with other learners not in isolation as these suggest and this should refer to multiple autonomies. Being in different learning contexts requires different qualities and attributes, so to say, and this is not being independent of others and in choices but as Little (1991) puts it being “*interdependent*”.

According to Little (2009, pp. 224 - 226) learners should be given the right to freely choose the learning aims, methods, materials, tasks by negotiating and agreeing with others, then an environment which supports cooperation and communication culture which is constantly assessed through learner journals should be created. To him, the implementation could find basis in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which was published to provide ‘*a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe*’ (Council of Europe 2001, p. 1). With CEFR, The European Language Portfolio was also developed as an addition to this unifying application and “*the ‘can do’ descriptors of the CEFR’s illustrative scales characterize the autonomous L2 user – autonomous precisely because they say what he or she can do – but also, by extension, the autonomous language learner*”. Overall, the European Union and its foreign language education policy support the learner autonomy.

3-D Virtual Learning Environments

The 3-D virtual learning environments (VLE) could be classified as an application of computer assisted language learning (CALL). According to Kluge and Riley, (2008, p. 128) these VLEs are regarded as “*multi-user virtual environments (MUVE) or Metaverse*”. To Warburton (2009, p. 414) the most popular 3-D multi-user virtual environment is the *Second Life* (SL) (<http://secondlife.com/>). Since the start-up of SL more than 24 millions of people have opened accounts and have joined the virtual worlds. The Horizon Report of 2007 forecasts that 3-D environments will have ‘strong potential for teaching and learning’, and that developments in open sources and standards will bring 3-D MUVEs

‘closer to the mainstream education year by year’ (EDUCAUSE, 2007, p. 25 in Edirisingha, Nie, Pluciennik and Young, 2009, p. 459). In this context, there are more examples for the 3-D VLEs including *OpenSim* (<http://www.opensimulator.org>), *There* (<http://www.there.com/>), *Olive* (<http://www.saic.com/products/simulation/olive/>), *Twinity* (<http://www.twinity.com/en>), *Entropia Universe* (<http://www.entropiauniverse.com/>), *Open Wonderland* (<http://openwonderland.org/>), *Active Worlds* (<http://www.activeworlds.com/>).

Second life is “a computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a sense of being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in, and to interact with that environment” (Schroeder, 1996, p. 25 in Warburton, 2009, p. 415). Edirisingha, Nie, Pluciennik and Young (2009, p. 459) persist that “a 3-D MUVE, such as SL, has the potential to generate a sense of presence among peer learners via their avatars in a 3-D environment through real-time interactions that may facilitate relationship-building, learners’ engagement and motivation”. The learners could be present in the environment by creating a new *identity* in the form of an avatar (Ushioda, 2011, p. 207). The form, shape and appearance of the avatar could be chosen, developed and changed by the learners themselves, and thus the learning experience could be individualized (Salmon, 2009, p. 526). As anonymous avatars, learners could attend to the learning environment, which as a result decreases the stress and anxiety and raises learners’ motivation (Chang, 2005, Ushioda 2011). Consequently, the learners take more risks and attend to activities more actively; these in return support foreign language learning (Peterson, 2010, s. 274).

Second Life, enables its avatars to use body language to some extent and eases the use of voice chat and thus supports the communication and interaction among the avatars, from which language education and distance learning applications could also benefit. Eventually, the real World in which humans actually use body language and voice is also modelled (Salmon, 2009, p. 529). With this real time synchronous communication and interaction learners could come together, make groups, learn in cooperation and socialize (Edirisingha et al. 2009, p. 459). SL is an environment where learning by role playing, experiential learning, cooperative learning and game based learning (Warburton, 2010, p. 421, Salmon, 2009, p. 528), authentic learning and meaningful learning (Keskitalo, Pyykkö and Roukamo, 2011, s. 17), constructivist learning (Kluge and Riley, 2008, p. 127; Can 2009, p. 63), task based learning (Peterson, 2010) could be realized.

This 3-D VLE is constructed, owned, changed and developed by the “*content and objects that are created by the learner*” (Keskitalo et al. 2011, Salmon 2009, p. 532). Learners have the freedom to design the learning environment itself. They can design and construct the environment in collaboration by determining scenarios, own what they create and construct the knowledge by free will. In this respect,

learners could relate to their own content, objects and other fellow learners, which enables them to be more active and independent in the learning process (Kluge & Riley, 2008). Thus, learners could attend to autonomy by having opportunity to decide on the design, objects, knowledge and what they create in the learning process. Learners are immersed in such environments that cater for realistic feeling of presence and opportunity of interaction (Salmon, 2009, Warburton, 2009, Keskitalo et al. 2011).

Warburton and Perez-Garcia (2009) summarize the components of SL which could facilitate innovation in pedagogy:

- *Extended or rich interactions*
- *Visualisation and contextualisation*
- *Exposure to authentic content and culture*
- *Individual and collective identity play*
- *Immersion*
- *Simulation*
- *Community presence*
- *Content production*

(in Warburton, 2009, p. 421)

3. Learner Autonomy, 3-D Virtual Learning Environments (Second Life) and Foreign Language Learning

According to Coffman and Klinger (2008, p. 32) “*Education in the 21st century should focus on communication, autonomy and control over a student’s own learning, and increased innovation and creativity. If 3-D MUVES are used effectively there is strong potential for instructors and learners to create a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.*” As has been previously stated, the Second life platform, which is a 3-D virtual learning environment that can be used in the context of foreign language learning, may be supportive not only in constructivist application but in learning autonomy, collaborative learning, project based learning in the context of distance education as well (Warburton, 2010, Salmon, 2009, Peterson, 2010).

SL platform is a “*student centred virtual learning platform*” (Coffman & Klinger, 2008, p. 30) as it supports and varies the opportunities for learners to choose the content independently while designing the learning environment. To Harmer (2001), letting the learners choose could be the first step to autonomy. Field (2007) postulates that “*learners who produce the learning materials and learning content are empowered*” and this leads to greater autonomy. 3-D VLEs and SL enable learners to choose and create the learning materials, design the learning environment and content, and give learners

independence in the learning process, thus they support and facilitate learner autonomy. These opportunities that SL platform is providing in the context of foreign language learning match Little's (1991, p. 24) definition of autonomy that states "*the learners' psychological relation with the learning process and content*". Learners' personalize the learning process by proactively relating to fellow learners, content and designing and changing it independently. During the creative process of content selection and production, learners need to be cognitively independent and while making sense of the content and interacting with it they need to be autonomous in action.

In the context of European Union's "*Lifelong Learning Program*" the Project "*AVALON*" (Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online) had been implemented for two years in 2009-2010 with the aims to use the VLEs effectively, to create materials and scenarios for use in the 3-D virtual reality, to design tasks to be used in VLEs, to create societies that can produce and share the knowledge virtually in the VLEs, to investigate the identity issue in VLEs and to implement SL as an environment where learners share action and learning (Panichi, L., Deutschmann, M. & Molka-Danielsen, J., 2010, p. 180). In this communicational and interactional environment learners create and share knowledge and learning materials, thus have an environment where they learn autonomously.

Harmer (2001, p. 397) posits that by group work teachers can create environments that facilitate learning contribution by taking decisions. To Edirisingha et. al. (2009, p. 461) "*studies of asynchronous online learning environments demonstrate the positive benefits of 'social presence' and 'socialisation' for online learning*". Through group work learners can work together on tasks, communicate and interact virtually, thus SL enables shared activities and collaborative learning. In his study, Peterson (2010) has observed seven learners during tasks conducted in SL. According to his research learners have not stepped off-topic much during the communication in tasks topics but remained on-topic most of the time. In the context of this research, "*the data collected in this research suggests that for this particular group of learners the context appeared to elicit a high degree of participation and autonomy*" (p. 289).

Deutschmann, M., Panichi, L. & Molka-Danielsson, J. (2009) created an island, Komimo, in SL platform to study PhD candidates who speak different languages while they are developing English language proficiency in speaking and listening skills. They planned two different lesson designs and teachers who would facilitate learner autonomy. As the results of the study show, it was observed that learners used English more effectively and collaborated more while working with the materials they created. In this context, learner autonomy is also social rather than individual phenomenon only, and is as Little (2009, p. 224) puts it "*interdependent*". Learners could collaborate and communicate not only with their peers but with any kind of authentic content and real people. There are some projects of this kind in

SL to support learners immersive independent activities such as “*Learning Tower of Pisa, Tower of London, Virtual Harlem*” (Molka-Danielsen J. & M. Deutschmann, 2009, p. 177); for Spanish practice “*Croquelandia*” and for practicing Mandarin Chinese speaking “*Zon*” (Levy, 2009, pp. 776-7).

Using technology as in CALL and SL for foreign language learning is likely to raise motivation. For instance, Chang (2005, p. 228) who has conducted a study on SL platform observed that the motivation of the learners who are using self-regulating strategies raised and their feeling of responsibility and self-confidence raised as well. Ushioda (2011, p. 208) also persists that technologies such as SL give learners more control on learning process and are effective in maintaining the motivation of the learners.

5. Conclusion

As a 3-D virtual learning environment SL facilitates distance education, collaborative learning, constructivist learning, learning outside the classroom, autonomous learning and etc. in the context of foreign language learning. In addition, by providing learners with the freedom to choose the learning materials makes learners create and design in the learning process, thus develop ownership on the process and environment of learning. In this respect, through SL platform learner autonomy can be viable with not only learner orientedness and individualized learning but also with learning together in collaboration. In the context of foreign language learning, SL platform may promote learner autonomy by affording learners communication and interaction among themselves and any other people and with the content and learning environment created and designed by themselves (Molka-Danielsen J. & M. Deutschmann, 2009; The AVALON Project, Field, 2007). Moreover, SL environment enables learners to immerse and practice in the target culture autonomously (Levy, 2009), raises the motivation of learners through technology use (Chang, 2005; Ushioda, 2011). To conclude, as a 3-D virtual learning environment Second Life promotes learner autonomy via its affordances for foreign language teaching and learning (Peterson, 2010).

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