

## SECOND LANGUAGE IN SECOND LIFE: EXPLORING INTERACTION, IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

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The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to the online virtual world known as Second Life, and to encourage dialogue in our profession about the potential benefits and limitations of using virtual worlds such as Second Life for foreign language teaching and learning. The article suggests that online virtual interactions in Second Life—which feature highly compelling visual and immersive components, synchronous language interaction, and the opportunity for conversation and collaboration with native speakers of the target language—offer learners opportunities to practice and perform in the language in ways that the traditional classroom setting does not allow. This is not to suggest that virtual worlds will or should replace traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. Rather, the article seeks to explore Second Life as a potential supplementary tool for instructors, which may help learners develop particular skills by creating a more contextualized language use experience in which learners practice in the virtual world what they learn in the real-world classroom.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on the changes we have witnessed in the development of foreign language instructional technologies since the publication of Olga Kagan and Benjamin Rifkin's 2000 volume *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures*, perhaps the most notable innovation of the last decade

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1. While this article focuses on Second Life, educators should be aware that there are a variety of similar online virtual worlds available through the Internet, which may feature different funding structures and interactive features. However, at this time Second Life is by far the largest, most developed and most populated of those available to the general public.

has been the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies into language instructional settings. Web 2.0, a term coined in 2004 (Solomon and Schrum 13), is used to describe the next generation of Internet technologies—blogs, wikis, podcasts, social-networking and social-bookmarking tools—which allow for “collaborative content building, dissemination, and categorization” of information (Sykes, Oskoz and Thorne 529). Such capabilities contrast with what is now being called Web 1.0, more traditional websites, which allow users to read, but not edit, interact with or contribute to the site content.<sup>2</sup> Additional Internet technologies that comprise Web 2.0 include MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games, such as World of Warcraft) and “open social virtualities” (Sykes, Oskoz and Thorne 529), such as the subject of this research study, Second Life. Emergent Web 2.0 technologies provide users with new opportunities for interconnectivity, social interaction, and expanded “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger) on the Web.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, applied linguists, particularly those rooted in Vygotskian sociocultural theories of language acquisition, have in recent years begun to study language use within these online social environments (Gee; Thorne and Payne; Thorne and Reinhardt; Magnan). Viewing Second Life through the prism of the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (*Standards* 2006), this study addresses areas in which traditional college foreign language instruction falls short in meeting the goals set out in the National Standards, and suggests that L2 interaction in a virtual world such as Second Life offers opportunities to address the learning goals of communicative language teaching by expanding beyond the bounds of traditional classroom instruction.

Through the results of first an inductive pilot study of a group of third-year Russian students and then of case studies of five intermediate- to advanced-level Russian language students operating in Second Life, we will observe how this interactive, immersive and content-rich virtual environment provides learners with ample opportunity for input, interaction, task-based learning and output production, goals which have been at the forefront of sociocultural approaches to second language acquisition for many years (see, e.g., Gass; Swain 2000, 2006). Such preliminary studies also begin to probe the question of L2 identity and cultural content in interactive online domains, and present evidence of language learning through negotiation of meaning in this type of situated practice. The final discussion offers sample pedagogical applications of online virtual worlds in the teaching and learning of Slavic languages and cultures.

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2. For more information and a comprehensive list of Web 2.0 applications, see Appendix B of Solomon and Schrum.

3. For an overview of Web 2.0 technologies available for language education, see Sykes, Oskoz and Thorne. For further studies on discourse and literacy in computer-mediated contexts, see Thorne and Payne; Thorne and Reinhardt; and Magnan.

### Background: What is Second Life?

The web-based virtual world of Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) was created by San Francisco-based Linden Labs and launched in 2003.<sup>4</sup> To run Second Life, users must download the software onto their computer, which must be connected to a high-speed Internet connection. A basic account, which allows the user to explore, visit and interact with other users, is free of charge. However, in order to build structures or control space in the world, users must purchase a premium account and pay a monthly fee for the land on which they build. At the time this article was written, a premium account cost US\$9.95/mo and monthly land fees ranged from \$5 to \$195, depending on the size of the land. Purchases in Second Life are made using a credit card or paypal to convert the user's funds to Linden Dollars, the currency used in Second Life.

In Second Life users take on a name and three-dimensional on-screen persona called an "avatar." First-time users are asked to select from an initial set of base avatars, shown in Figure 1.

### Choose a starting look

Click on images below to select a starting look. Once in Second Life, you can change your appearance, or shop for a whole new look.



Figure 1: Selecting an avatar (<https://join.secondlife.com>)

Each avatar must have a unique name, which is formed from a user-generated first name and the user's choice of surname from a list of available names from the Second Life database.<sup>5</sup> Users may edit their avatar's appearance by adding free or purchased features such as clothing, hair, skin tones, gestures and accessories to their "inventory," and may activate (or wear) the desired features by selecting them from the avatar's inventory. Some users modify

4. For more information on the history, activities and culture of Second Life see Rymaszewski; Au. For instruction manuals on building and designing space in this virtual world, see Robbins and Bell; Weber, Rufer-Bach and Platel.

5. Linden Lab employees are identifiable by the surname "Linden."

their avatars to resemble their own physical appearance, while others adopt imaginative visual representations of themselves. The use of avatars in Second Life adds an intriguing layer of complexity to the issue of identity in online communicative settings; second language researchers and applied linguists have only just begun to explore the “avatar factor” in computer-mediated L2 interactions.<sup>6</sup>

Avatars move through the online world using the mouse or arrow keys, and can make gestures and perform a range of facial expressions. Avatars also have the ability to fly and teleport to reach desired locations within Second Life. An internal search engine allows users to locate simulated cities and other geographic locations, fellow residents, and interest groups or social networks that exist in-world. Participants encounter other avatars (each controlled by a real-world user) and hold conversations, most commonly through the built-in chat program, but also through external voice software such as Skype. Avatars can buy and sell objects and property, build structures, and attend events ranging from concerts to lectures to business meetings. While it is possible to play games in certain areas of the virtual world, Second Life should not be understood as a “game” so much as a virtual *space* that is shaped entirely by its users.

While many believe in Second Life’s potential to redefine how we use the Internet, there are undoubtedly many reasons to be skeptical of this type of new technology. Indeed, much of its initial appeal is due to the various “bells and whistles” that have compelled millions world-wide to register an avatar, and the mass media—from CNBC to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—to pick up the story of the new and exciting online space where dreams can become (virtual) reality.<sup>7</sup> There are reasons to be wary of bringing students into the world of Second Life; the “wild west” of Internet technology, Second Life is host to a large-scale pornography industry, and cyber bullies known as “griefers” have been known to create unpleasant disturbances for users. Nonetheless, within the vast expanses of the world of Second Life, educational institutions, including hundreds of universities, libraries, and private and governmental organizations, have created virtual campuses (fig. 2), museums (fig. 3), simulations and resource databases as a way of uniting learners across the globe. Second Life rents campus space to educators, and there is an arsenal of resources on the Internet—for example, the website SimTeach<sup>8</sup> and the active educators’ listserv, SLED—to assist educators in developing teaching and learning spaces in-world.

For educators working with younger students, Teen Second Life (<[www.teen.secondlife.com](http://www.teen.secondlife.com)>) is available for use with high school students. All educators considering using Second Life can create “safe spaces” for their

6. See Thorne and Black.

7. See, for example, Foster.

8. <[http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Institutions\\_and\\_Organizations\\_in\\_SL](http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Institutions_and_Organizations_in_SL)>.



Figure 2: The author's avatar at a reference kiosk in a library on Princeton University's Second Life campus.



Figure 3: Second Life's Dresden Gallery, a full simulation of the Old Masters Picture Gallery in Dresden. Clicking on a painting yields an informational text box (lower left).

learners by buying or working on land designated “PG,” by keeping their spaces unlisted in the Second Life search engine to avoid traffic from outsiders, or even by blocking their space from use by anyone outside of their class list. Students can and should be given orientation sessions in Second Life during which they can become comfortable with the basic maneuvers and features of the program, and instructors should make them aware of how to report abuses and how to remove themselves from uncomfortable situations.

### **Meeting the Challenges of Standards-based Pedagogy**

Language pedagogy specialists both inside and outside the field of Slavic languages (e.g. Omaggio-Hadley, Rifkin 2006) have argued for a *Standards-* and *Proficiency Guidelines-*based approach to communicative language teaching with focus not only on oral skills, but also on literacy and cultural competence. Second Life offers strategies for combating two key challenges that language teachers face in trying to implement this approach. First, Second Life presents opportunities for extended, active, immersive practice time, which may aid college-level language instructors in combating what Rifkin (2005) has called the “ceiling effect” in traditional university language curricula. Secondly, by providing learners with opportunities for broad access to native speaker communities and a virtual space for collaboration and exchange, Second Life has the potential to address all five components of the National Standards: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities.<sup>9</sup>

Rifkin’s study of language gains made by students at an intensive summer Russian-language immersion program concluded that in order to achieve advanced-level proficiency in one or more skill areas, students require approximately 600 hours of classroom instruction. Results from a survey of college language programs revealed that an average of just over 400 hours of classroom instruction is available at U.S. universities. As a result, “traditional [four-year university] classroom Russian language learning is, most likely, constrained by a ceiling just below the advanced level” (Rifkin 2005, 13). Rifkin concludes that “[w]ithout an immersion experience, students of Russian will likely find it difficult, if not impossible, to break through this ceiling into advanced level proficiencies” (13). Rifkin’s recommended path toward advanced-level proficiency for college students of Russian is to begin in a traditional classroom setting, then to take part in an intensive immersion program, either in the U.S. or in Russia (13). The primary factor that accounts for students’ ability to achieve advanced level proficiency in an intensive immersion environment is time-on-task. Second Life offers instructors a way of increasing student time-on-task in an environment that may be particularly attractive to many young language learners.

The second challenge to Standards-based language instruction is to effec-

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9. For full text, see *Standards*. For *Proficiency Guidelines* see American Council.

tively address the goals of the National Standards—which place emphasis on cultural competence, cross-disciplinary interaction and community building—both in and out of the classroom. Despite increasing emphasis on cultural literacy within college curricula, foreign language instructors still struggle to integrate target language culture into daily classroom practice. With the rare exception of service-learning programs, college-level language learners in the U.S. rarely have the chance to interact with a target language community, and it can be difficult to offer learners opportunity for collaboration with target language speakers on projects in other disciplines. Internet technology, and virtual worlds in particular, may help to bridge the gap between the theoretical goals of the National Standards and the realities and limitations of classroom practice.

### **Russian Language Communities in Second Life**

Because this research study focuses primarily on the experience of learners of Russian in this virtual world, it is important to describe Second Life's major Russian-language areas and the presence of Russian speakers and their culture in this virtual space. The August 2007 issue of *Russian Empire Magazine* (Barzane), an online journal devoted to Russian community activities in Second Life, claims that there are approximately 12,000 registered Russian avatars, one thousand of whom are active (that is, they have visited Second Life periodically for at least 2 weeks). At this time, there are three primary areas of Second Life where Russian-speaking avatars congregate: the Russian Welcome Area (part of the TechInvest Island), the Russian Empire simulation (sim), and Moscow Island. While there is nothing about the Russian Welcome Area and Russian Empire that attempts to visually simulate a Russian city or landscape, Moscow Island—launched in September of 2007—is a virtual simulation of Moscow's Red Square (fig. 4), which includes the GUM shopping center, the Kremlin wall, St. Basil's Cathedral, and the Lenin Mausoleum (complete with Lenin's body under glass inside the building). Slavists may also be interested to know that a virtual Poland is also under construction; one can already visit Market Square in Second Life's virtual "Second Krakow" (<http://www.cracow-life.com/poland/second-krakow>).

### **Pilot Study: Challenges and Lessons Learned**

An initial 2007 pilot study of student interactions in Second Life yielded findings about some of the strategic pitfalls that may arise when introducing foreign language learners into target language communities in virtual worlds. Educators drawn to the notion that learners can interact with speakers of the target language must also be aware of the presence of social norms within online cultural communities, whose members may or may not respond favorably to the presence of a large group of learners in their virtual space. In the initial pilot study, a group of five third-year Russian language students, none

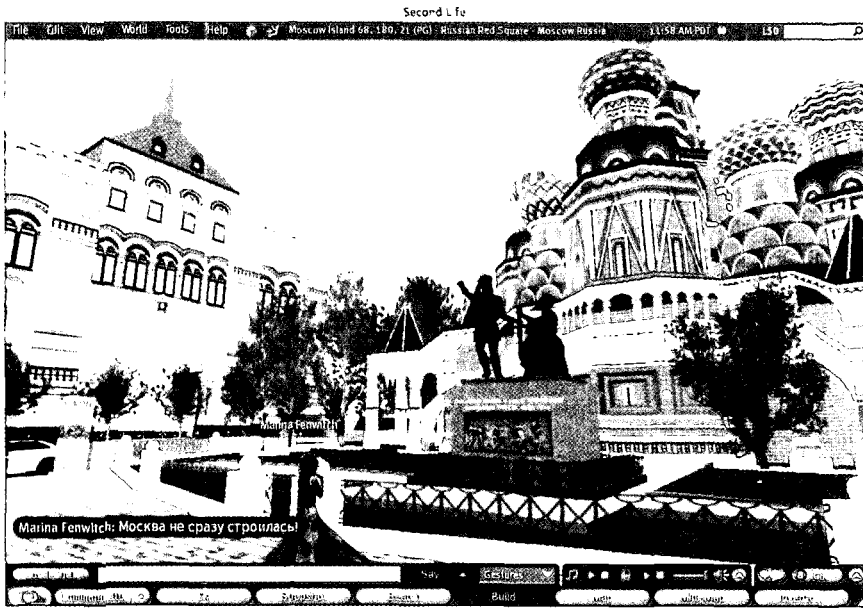


Figure 4: St. Basil's Cathedral and GUM on Red Square in Second Life Moscow

of whom had previously spent time in Russia, visited Russian-speaking areas of Second Life accompanied by two instructors, who attempted to mediate the interactions between the students and the native speakers they encountered there. The participants in the study had little or no prior experience using Internet chat in Russian, and their poor typing skills, along with the difficulty they experienced reading the multi-voiced chat transcript that appeared and quickly disappeared from the screen, made it nearly impossible for them to sustain conversation with their native speaker interlocutors. Many of the native speakers—who had come to dance and socialize at a beach area in one of the Russian language sims—were frustrated by the influx of so many seemingly unresponsive avatars. Some of the native speakers began to tease the learners about their poor language skills and typing errors. Several of these individuals used colloquial and vulgar language to express their hostility towards the students, though others came to their defense, referring to them as guests deserving of respect.

The researcher drew several lessons from the pilot study. Firstly, to ensure that students enter into native speaker (NS) interactions with strong typing skills in the target language, it is advisable for instructors to give learners sufficient practice with synchronous text-based Internet chat programs (such as AIM, iChat, or the chat applications built in to Gmail or Facebook) prior to being immersed in the world of Second Life. Secondly, it is critical for instruc-



tors to explore and understand the social culture of Second Life. Just as in real life, large groups of uninvited guests may not be well received in Second Life; interactions with native speakers are more successful with a very small ratio of non-native speakers (NNS) to native speakers. In fact, individual encounters of one NNS in a group of NSs are ideal, especially when students are just beginning to explore Second Life. Finally, instructors should be aware that interaction with native speakers is not the only possible use for Second Life; groups of learners can effectively interact with one another and practice their language skills in contextualized, content-rich environments in the world, even without the presence of native speakers. An example of such activities will be presented at the conclusion of the article in the section on learning modules.

### **Case Studies: L2 Identity, Acquisition and Target Language Culture**

The primary focus of the following 2008 case studies was to examine three key areas of inquiry related to Russian language learners' interactions and identity formation within the Russian-language areas of Second Life:

1. To determine whether there is evidence that language acquisition occurs through interaction and negotiation of meaning within the virtual world setting;
2. To examine questions of L2 identity choices, affective responses to the virtual setting, and learner interaction strategies with target language speakers;
3. To explore the presence of target-language culture in the virtual space.

Addressing the first research question, the case studies present data from the text of the online interactions between learners and native speakers of the target language. The results highlight several instances of input and uptake that occurred in the exchanges between participants and their native speaker interlocutors, and relate these findings to reports from the participants about lexical items that they acquired during their conversations in Second Life. The data show positive evidence of language learning on a lexical level, and suggest that further research could yield results in the acquisition of syntax.

The second goal was to begin to understand how L2 social identity is created and modified within virtual world L2 settings. Focusing on the mediating force of the avatar, the challenges of operating in an online environment, and strategies the participants employed to exhibit or disguise their L2 status, the case studies sought to understand how learners characterize the relationship between the avatar and themselves, and to examine how the participants functioned socially with native speaker interlocutors. Results suggest that the visual component of the virtual world environment plays a key role in shaping the user's experience, and that interaction in the virtual environment promotes attention to linguistic accuracy along with cultural sensitivity. In addition, while a computer-mediated virtual space can never substitute for time

spent in the real-world cross-cultural context, the results of this study suggest that there are several key parallels between the emotional and affective experience in a virtual L2 space in Second Life and a learner's experience in the target culture. This section also presents representative examples of the presence of Russian culture in Second Life.

### Participants and Procedure

Each of the five participants in the case studies took part in an initial two-hour orientation session with the researcher in order to learn basic skills for operating in Second Life. During this session, participants created an account in Second Life and chose an avatar name and appearance. They also received instruction on how to move about the world, how to interact with objects in Second Life, and how to chat with other residents of the world. The participants visited the Russian language areas of Second Life and practiced chatting in Russian with other avatars they encountered there.<sup>10</sup>

Data collection occurred during a second session. Each participant met individually with the researcher and spent an additional 30–45 minutes in Second Life. The participants were given open-ended instructions: to get acquainted and converse with other Russian-speaking avatars and to obtain as much information as possible about their interlocutors. During this session, the researcher recorded their interactions with screen capture video software (Snapz Pro X), which saved onscreen interactions as QuickTime videos. The researcher also retained transcripts of the chat sessions for analysis. The in-world sessions were followed, after a short break, by a ten- to fifteen-minute interview during which the participants were asked a series of questions about their interactions in Second Life. These interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed for analysis.

The participants in this study were five Russian language learners from a fourth-year Russian course (7th semester) at a large Midwestern university.<sup>11</sup> Each of the participants was a native speaker of English and had begun studying the Russian language in the first year of university. Four of the five participants—“Hedli Forzane,” “Sveta Thursday,” “Misha Gudkov,” and “Cynthia Gears”<sup>12</sup>—had spent at least one semester on a study abroad program in

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10. Because of the anonymous nature of interactions with other avatars, it is impossible to confirm whether or not the interlocutors encountered in the study were in fact native speakers of the target language, although there is nothing in the data to suggest that they were not. Henceforth, the term “NS” should be understood to refer to any user present in a Russian-speaking area of Second Life using Russian without obvious NNS errors.

11. Institutional Review Board (human subjects research) protocol: SE-2007-0736. Approved: 2/15/2008.

12. The names presented here are the pseudonyms chosen by study participants for their avatars. Some participants reported choosing a Russian first name as a way of connecting to the L2 target language community they expected to encounter. The choice of a Russian name was, in two cases, the name the participants used in their university language classroom.

Russia during the previous academic year. These four participants were at the intermediate high (1.9) through advanced mid (2.5) proficiency level in speaking.<sup>13</sup> The one participant who had not been on study abroad, whose avatar name was “Yasha Liotta,” was at the intermediate mid (1.5) proficiency level in speaking.

### **Findings 1: Language Learning in Second Life**

Foreign language instructors tend to express greater interest in the voice software capabilities of Second Life than the typed chat interface.<sup>14</sup> The present study, however, examined interaction between participants and native speakers in Second Life using the typed chat function as the sole means of communication. Results indicate that chat may provide benefits in terms of developing lexicon, improving writing skills, and encouraging focus on form, private speech and self-correction in learners.

When asked about the degree of emphasis placed on spelling and grammar in their online interactions in Second Life, several participants remarked that the chat medium allowed them to interpret and produce written forms of colloquial speech, which they believed helped improve their language skills. They reported paying close attention to grammar and spelling, and the researcher observed that participants frequently edited their work before posting the message to the public screen. Furthermore, the researcher observed that participants often employed private speech, talking aloud in both English and Russian as they composed their chat messages.<sup>15</sup>

Participants suggested that they were able to “make connections” and “learn structures” from interlocutors more readily because of the written format of the chat interface. In fact, the data from this study provide clear evidence of examples of uptake resulting from input that the learners received during the course of their interactions. Furthermore, as revealed in the post-session interviews, all five participants learned at least one new Russian-language lexical item or recalled a lexeme from passive knowledge as a result of their interactions in Second Life. The following chat transcript samples show two such instances of uptake.<sup>16</sup> In the first sample, Sveta Thursday discusses her travels to Sochi with two Russian-speaking avatars, Serge Itano and So

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13. Based on the ACTFL proficiency scale. It should be noted that participants did not undergo an OPI. Proficiency level was estimated by an instructor familiar with the OPI scale and who was aware of the linguistic abilities of the participants.

14. Surveys conducted by the author of two groups of foreign language instructors (total 42 respondents) who possessed basic familiarity with Second Life showed that the majority of instructors believe that voice software communication is more beneficial to language learning than typed chat communication.

15. Private speech is considering one of the fundamental organizing principles for language development in sociocultural theory (see Lantolf and Thorne).

16. Translations of chat transcripts are my own.

Hyun. The bolded section highlights how Sveta asks for information about the lexical item *peshchery* [caves]. In her post-session interview, this participant was able to recall this lexical item.

Sveta Thursday: Вы были в Сочи когда нибудь?	Sveta Thursday: Have you ever been to Sochi?
Serge Itano: конечно	Serge Itano: of course
Serge Itano: а ты? ) <sup>17</sup>	Serge Itano: and you? )
Sveta Thursday: а Я тоже	Sveta Thursday: and Me too
Serge Itano: класс ) правда купаться там не очень	Serge Itano: cool ) true, its not the best for swimming
So Hyun: сочи лажа делать там нечего	So Hyun: sochi's crap there's nothing to do there
Sveta Thursday: да там видела горы	Sveta Thursday: yes I saw the mountains there
Serge Itano: там пещеры есть интересные	Serge Itano: <b>there are interesting caves</b> <b>[peshchery] there</b>
Serge Itano: нечего делать на побережье	Serge Itano: there's nothing to do on the shore
Sveta Thursday: что такое пещеры?	Sveta Thursday: <b>what is peshery? [sic]</b>
So Hyun: ну это такие дырки в горах )	So Hyun: <b>well, it's those holes in the</b> <b>mountains)</b>
Serge Itano: caves	Serge Itano: <b>[in English] caves</b>
Sveta Thursday: понятно	Sveta Thursday: <b>got it</b>

We see evidence here of the kind of negotiation of meaning that many researchers have found to be a natural and productive aspect of second language acquisition. In response to her question “what is peshery? [sic],” Sveta received both a simple definition of the word in Russian “dyrki v gorakh” (“holes in the mountains”), and a reinforcement in English, “caves,” by an interlocutor with knowledge of English. The participant then acknowledged that she understood the explanation and, over thirty minutes later, was able to reproduce the word in her post-session interview:

**Researcher:** Did you learn anything new today? New words? Or symbols?

**Sveta Thursday:** I learned the word for “caves”

**Researcher:** Do you remember what it is?

**Sveta Thursday:** Peshchera. [NB: “peshchera” is the singular form “cave”]

**Researcher:** Right.

**Sveta Thursday:** I think I remembered some words I knew previously, too. For example I had forgotten the word for “hike,” but when he said it, I thought, “oh yeah, that’s right.”

Sveta Thursday’s statement about recognizing words she knew passively and, in some cases, activating them, is a phenomenon illustrated in an exchange between Hedli Forzane and her Russian native speaker interlocutor, Booommy Arado. In the exchange below, Hedli and Booommy discuss infrastructure problems in Moscow, in particular, traffic.

17. The symbol “)” found throughout this exchange is used as an abbreviated “smile” emoticon. Repetition of this symbol, for example ))))))) is commonly used in Russian Internet chat to denote intensified emotion.

- Hedli Forzane: я училась в Петербурге  
Booommy Arado: )))  
Hedli Forzane: хотя я путешествовала в  
москве  
Hedli Forzane: очень хороший город!  
Booommy Arado: **Ага))) Ток пробки))** [sic]
- Hedli Forzane: что это “пробки”?  
Booommy Arado: **Ммм.....заторы на  
дорогах из автомобилей))**  
Hedli Forzane: **а понятно**  
Booommy Arado: )))  
Booommy Arado: У вас там наверное нет  
такого явления)  
Hedli Forzane: я ходила пешком когда я  
была... **нет пробек\*!**
- Hedli Forzane: да, есть!  
Booommy Arado: Так ты пешком ходила)))  
А как тебе наше метро?))  
Hedli Forzane: **я живу в чикаго и у нас  
ужасные пробки!**
- Booommy Arado: Вот вот))) У нас так же)  
Hedli Forzane: I studied in Petersburg  
Booommy Arado: )))  
Hedli Forzane: though I traveled in moscow  
Hedli Forzane: [it’s a] really great city!  
Booommy Arado: **Aha))) Only<sup>18</sup> traffic  
jams))** [“probki”]  
Hedli Forzane: **what is that “probki”?**  
Booommy Arado: **Hmm...blockage on the  
roads from cars))**  
Hedli Forzane: **ah, okay**  
Booommy Arado: )))  
Booommy Arado: You probably don’t have  
that problem) [in the U.S.]  
Hedli Forzane: I went around on foot when I  
was [there]...**no traffic jams** [“net  
probek”\*]  
[\*NB: should be “probok”]  
Hedli Forzane: yes there are!  
Booommy Arado: So you went on foot)))  
And how did you like our metro?))  
Hedli Forzane: **I live in Chicago and we  
have terrible traffic jams!** [“uzhasnye  
probki”]  
Booommy Arado: There you have it))) We do  
too)

In this example of negotiation of meaning, we can see that the word for traffic jams, “probki,” became the topic of an information-seeking question by Hedli and was subsequently incorporated into her speech as uptake. Despite a spelling error, Hedli also made necessary morphological changes to the word when the genitive case was required to negate the word (“no traffic jams” or “net probok”). The above examples of lexical item acquisition and reinforcement from this study suggest that a longitudinal study of acquisition of deeper syntactical and pragmatic functions in Second Life would be a productive area of inquiry as a next step in examining second language acquisition in virtual L2 environments.

## Findings 2: On L2 Identity, Culture, Anxiety and Learner Motivation

One of the central challenges to communicative language teaching is to create within a classroom setting what Burns and Gentry call “tension-to-learn,” that is, an environment that provides learners with a manageable gap in their knowledge and motivation to fill this knowledge gap. Traditional classroom L2 instruction, even instruction based on the communicative method, often

18. Here Booommy uses “Tok,” an abbreviated form of “Tol’ko” [Only] common in Russian Internet chat formats; the use of nonstandard forms in Internet chat and its effect on learners is an important issue, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

fails to provide sufficiently compelling social, emotional and environmental stimuli that would motivate learners to participate actively in target language situational practice, such as role play. This is because traditional instructional settings do not produce the equivalent real-world consequences that learners might face, for example, in the target language country.

Central to a truly motivating instructional task is that the learner must perceive the task as *legitimate* and *relevant* to his or her value system (Burns and Gentry). Second Life offers learners opportunities to communicate with native speakers of the target language in a setting that creates “tension-to-learn” on a variety of levels. While some learners may find that the computer mediated interactions lower the affective filter and decrease anxiety, the present research indicates that the key characteristic that distinguishes Second Life from other types of online communication is that the visual component actually *increases* anxiety to a level that mimics face-to-face interaction in the target culture. For example study participants reported the following:

“It was intimidating at first, especially since the first time [during the pilot study], I made some mistakes and got some negative feedback from that. So, that was sort of intimidating. I was definitely a little worried about coming in and doing this...because if you type at a slow speed and can’t get sentences out, people are going to become annoyed with you, or not listen to you, or you just can’t communicate.”  
—Cynthia Gears

“...what I thought was interesting, thinking back on it, was that small talk and meeting new people can be...it can be awkward. Like in real life, you experience awkward pauses and you don’t know what to say, especially in a second language. And that translated into Second Life.”

—Hedli Forzane

**Researcher:** Do you think that having the visual image, actually seeing the interlocutor...do you think that affects the experience?

**Hedli Forzane:** I think it makes it more awkward...because sometimes you’re not looking at each other, or you’re wandering around...

In the above quotations, we see how participants experienced a strong degree of social anxiety in their interactions with NSs in Second Life. They transfer anxiety about meeting new people in real life into the Second Life context, and Hedli notes that as a new user, she still is not fully in control of her avatar’s body language. The fact that she mentions eye contact and body language is significant, for it reinforces the notion that these visual cues play a similarly important role in virtual worlds as in real life.

The researcher also observed that many of the participants compared their experience as an L2 speaker in the Russian areas of Second Life with their real-life study abroad experience in Russia, suggesting that the virtual environment mimics the kind of emotional pressure that learners experience when operating in the real-life target culture, further evidence of the “tension-to-learn” that the virtual environment creates. The visual image of avatars moving about a virtual world results in a compelling simulation of real-life face-to-face conversations. In fact, scientists at Stanford University who have

studied social interaction in Second Life have noted that avatars tend to maintain the same degree of personal space in Second Life as people do in real life (NPR, 5/3/07).<sup>19</sup> In addition, the body language of avatars—including eye contact, gestures and facial expressions—can closely mimic real-life interactions; the connection between the user's emotional/affective experience and the visual experience of operating in the virtual environment was palpable both for participants and for their native speaker interlocutors.

The mediating factor of the avatar also gave participants the ability to construct and manipulate their L2 identities. While some chose a less conspicuous avatar that they felt reflected their real-life personality, one participant selected an avatar whose appearance helped her achieve a greater sense of confidence in her interactions with her NS interlocutors in Second Life.

**Researcher:** Can you describe your avatar's personality?

**Sveta Thursday:** Um, she just seems kind of fun, easy going, just wanting to interact with people, talk with people...

**Researcher:** Does the visual image of your avatar make you feel a certain way?

**Sveta Thursday:** Yes, I think that because she looks very hip going up and talking to people, I think *it felt like she had more confidence*, and she *carried this confidence with her* and was willing to go up to people and talk with anyone. (Emphasis added)

Sveta Thursday undoubtedly garnered a greater sense of self-confidence from her avatar's appearance. Participants reported a strong appeal in the mediating force of the avatar; the avatar's name and appearance can act as a mask, permitting the user to try on a new identity, not only as an L2 speaker, but also as an entirely new persona.

**Researcher:** If you had to explain to someone who was unfamiliar with Second Life, how would you describe the relationship between you and your avatar. Are you your avatar?

**Cynthia Gears:** I would say you *aren't* exactly your avatar because you can separate yourself from it. That's the beauty of it, especially in situations that might be uncomfortable because you can step back from your avatar. But it is an extension of yourself, I would say. You can make it be the self that you would like to be. Or a side you don't reveal in regular life.

Several participants described the avatar-user relationship in similar terms, highlighting the fact that the user has the opportunity to take on a completely new identity. However, other than the fact that they had a new name and appearance, all but one of the participants reported that they did *not* consciously attempt to modify their personality or identity. In fact, most participants used their true L2 learner identity as a means of initiating conversation and finding sympathetic interlocutors.

Cultural factors can also play a role in the affective response of users in Second Life. During preliminary explorations of Second Life, the researcher and a colleague found themselves in a Russian area of the virtual world on the

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19. [http://www.npr.org/blogs/bryantpark/2007/05/dont\\_stand\\_so\\_close\\_to\\_me.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/bryantpark/2007/05/dont_stand_so_close_to_me.html). Accessed 5/17/07.

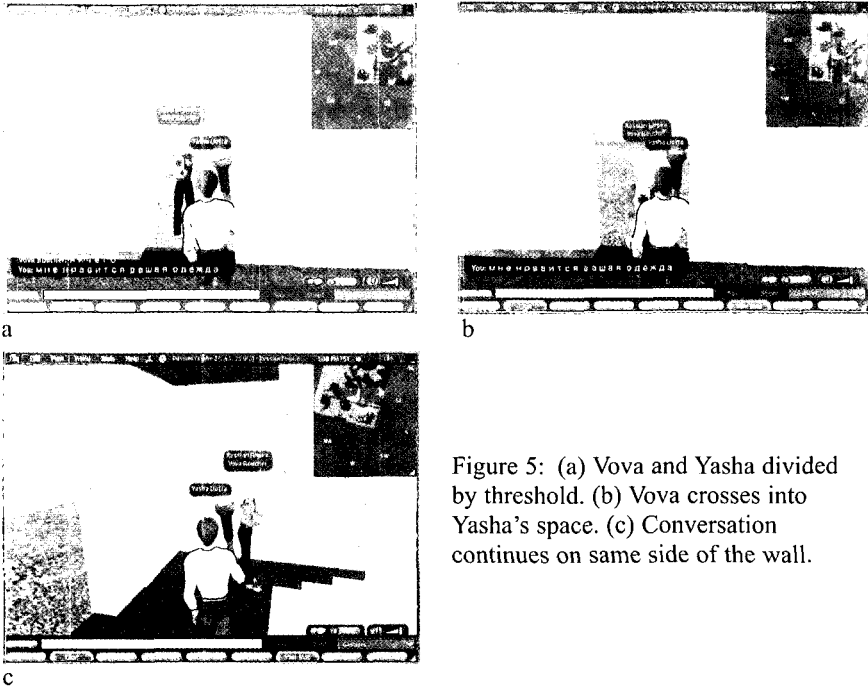


Figure 5: (a) Vova and Yasha divided by threshold. (b) Vova crosses into Yasha's space. (c) Conversation continues on same side of the wall.

eighth of May, and were presented with a large glowing flower by a Russian avatar in honor of International Women's Day; giving flowers to female colleagues is customary for this holiday in Russia. In another example, during a conversation between Yasha Liotta (a case study participant) and Vova Boucher (a Russian avatar), the positioning of the avatars on the screen caused the native speaker avatar to move to a location on the screen that was more culturally appropriate for him (see fig. 5). As they began their conversation, Yasha stood inside a building, while Vova was positioned outside the building, speaking to Yasha through a doorway (5a). The two avatars were oriented such that they were talking across a threshold, something that is generally avoided in Russian culture. Mid-conversation, Vova, the native Russian, changed the orientation of his avatar, moving his virtual being inside the building to continue the conversation on the same side of the doorway as Yasha (5b and 5c). From this example, we can see how the affective response of users of Second Life extends beyond the level of basic human responses to body language; affective responses can be nuanced by particular cultural norms, as well.<sup>20</sup>

While most participants attempted to use their non-native speaker status as

20. In an interesting deviation from cultural norms, all Russian-speaking avatars in Second Life use the informal *ty* to address others, even upon first meeting a new avatar.



a way of connecting on a comfortable level with native speaker interlocutors, there was one participant who did attempt to take on a different persona through his avatar. This participant, Misha Gudkov, had the highest level of speaking proficiency (estimated at 2.5) of all the participants. In his interactions, Misha attempted to modify his national identity and, in one case, present himself as bisexual. Regarding his national identity, Misha Gudkov, who chose both a Russian first name and surname, tried very hard to “be Russian.” His motivations stemmed from anxiety he felt about being perceived as an American while he was living in Russia during the previous academic year. And, while he could not hide his foreign accent or distinctly non-Russian facial features in Russia, he was successful in his attempt not to give away his true identity as a learner of Russian in *Second Life*.

**Researcher:** What was it like to be a non-native speaker of Russian in *Second Life*?

**Misha Gudkov:** Well, I was dealing with this issue in Russia, too. I desperately didn’t want to stick out as this American who speaks really bad Russian... I really didn’t want to get written off as this guy who’s just playing around with this complex language because for me, I really want to make it into a career. But with *Second Life*, they couldn’t see how I looked...[and unless] I made a mistake in my written Russian, they had no choice but to assume that I was Russian.

During his most extensive interaction in *Second Life*, Misha’s avatar began dancing with another male avatar and, as a result of the visual component of the virtual world experience, Misha and his interlocutor—who identified himself as a Russian-born Jew living in Israel—entered a playful social context in which Misha pretended to be bisexual. The conversation moved in and out of the sexual realm, touching on other subjects as diverse as work and study, country of origin, free time activities, military conscription and the complicated mechanics of operating an avatar in *Second Life*. This example demonstrates the potential for the avatar to act as a mask, heightening the user’s sense of freedom to experiment with the language and to take more linguistic risks. Whether or not the user chooses to disguise his true identity (national or other), the visual experience of seeing one’s avatar on screen and interacting and conversing with other avatars creates a sensation that is in many ways more compelling than simulated role plays in a classroom environment. In his interview, Misha remarked that, although he is heterosexual, he found that once he took on a bisexual identity he worked to maintain it throughout the conversation; he also reported that his conversation with this particular avatar was not only the longest, but also the most interesting and challenging of all the interactions he had with Russian-speaking users during his time in *Second Life*.

### **Second Life Learning Modules**

The final section of this article offers suggestions for activities that instructors might use in *Second Life* to tap into the opportunities available in the virtual world for cultural exchange and a more authentic emotional/psychological L2 experience, as a way of supplementing traditional foreign language classroom

instruction. Not all learners will have the linguistic proficiency to engage in spontaneous conversations with native speakers in Second Life, and not all instructors will have the skills or desire to create intricate learning spaces for their students. The first and third learning modules described below require minimal technical skills in terms of operating in the virtual world. The second activity would require more significant technical and financial investment, but shows more of the potential Second Life offers for embedding cultural and literary content into educational simulations.

### *1. Topical Survey of Russian Speakers in Second Life*

For upper intermediate- and advanced-level learners who are prepared to enter into spontaneous interactions with native speakers of the target language in Second Life, interviews and surveys are useful activities to encourage communication in the target language. Such tasks are appropriate to the learners' proficiency level and do not require that instructors create any particular simulated space in the virtual world, yet this type of activity makes good use of the access to native speakers that Second Life offers. Instructors could work with learners to prepare questionnaires in advance on a particular topic about life in Russia (reactions to current events, thoughts about family, travel, education, Internet use, etc.). Learners would then use the questionnaire to interview native speakers in Second Life. Results of the surveys could be reported in-class (or online) as an oral presentation or written report.

### *2. Crime and Punishment: A Literary Tour of Dostoevsky's Petersburg*

Language instructors, literature specialists and computer programmers could collaborate to create an in-world simulated tour of the world of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Learners could be assigned to trace Raskolnikov's journey based on the novel and collect information about the different locales, read or listen to excerpts from the novel, perform scenes from the novel in the virtual space, and answer questions about theme, plot and characters in certain online forums, or as part of a scavenger hunt. A virtual simulation of Dostoevsky's Petersburg could contain embedded content in both Russian and English, making the activities available to a wider audience of both language and literature students.

### *3. Giving Directions.*

Dalhousie University Russian language instructor Shannon Spasova received a grant in 2008 to create Russian language lessons in Second Life to accompany the course curriculum for their second-year Russian course. Spasova has constructed a virtual Russian city in Second Life<sup>21</sup> (see fig. 6) and created a

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21. Access Spasova's creation at <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Murrumbidgee/234/205/101>.



Figure 6: A market in Spasova's virtual Russian city (photograph by S. Spasova)

series of activities for students to practice giving and asking for directions and shopping for goods, topics found in most beginning-level Russian textbooks. These activities offer beginning learners the experience of functioning linguistically in an unfamiliar locale, while also sheltering them from the challenges of interacting with native speakers in the virtual world. To further enhance the simulation, proficient target language speakers, instructors, or even pre-programmed computerized avatars<sup>22</sup> can participate in the exercise in the role of shop clerks or passersby in the street. Because of the capacity to move around the virtual city, learner motivation to accurately complete the task—to have the sensation of physically *arriving* at the intended location—will likely be higher in the virtual world than it would be in a classroom setting, where authentic contexts for these particular speech acts are virtually impossible to simulate. Spasova notes, “one thing that I think is exciting about being in the virtual environment is that the consequences become meaningful; if [the learners] don't understand the directions, they won't 'get to' where they should go. [This is] similar to real-life consequences but without the real-life danger of being late, for example.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Spasova has discussed the importance of the effects of the visual-spatial component in simu-

22. For more on the mechanics of robots in online learning games, see Graesser et al. 2005.

23. Personal correspondence with Shannon Spasova, 8/30/08.

lating the unpredictability of real-world movement.<sup>24</sup> For example, her simulated Russian city allows users to experience the sensation of searching for items in an expansive market or shops on an unfamiliar street; as in real world contexts, we don't always know what we will find around the corner.

### **Conclusion: Why study [in] a virtual world?**

Online environments, including virtual worlds, have become increasingly attractive to applied linguists (Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007; Thorne 2008) as spaces for studying language in use. The virtual nature of these spaces makes it necessary to consider a new kind of ethnographic inquiry into how online interactions differ from face-to-face communication. At the same time, the potential for studying language use in these cutting-edge research environments is extremely rich. The environment is especially conducive to conversational analysis, the study of turn-taking, the use of gestures, and other elements of interpersonal communication.

As more and more educators collaborate to develop research studies and educational models for best practices in online learning environments such as Second Life, it will also become easier for language educators to tap into these resources for teaching and learning purposes. Teaching language in an online environment requires investing a significant amount of time and energy in creating learning spaces and activities for students that correspond to specific learning goals. However, as we have seen from this study, advanced-level language students can gain additional full-immersion language practice in Second Life through interactions with target language speakers in-world, and tasks for learners of all levels can be designed and implemented, some with relatively little investment in the technology. The participants in both the pilot and case studies described here reported that they would consider returning to Second Life for additional practice on their own time, and that they enjoyed experimenting with this engaging and interactive learning space, which provides opportunities for spontaneous interaction and rewards successful communication. Second Life offers educators access to native speaker communities, cultural exchange, and the possibility of creating content-rich learning activities—such as scavenger hunts, role-plays and virtual cities or museums—for all levels of learners, from beginner to advanced. Because learners can access Second Life from a personal computer, this virtual world promotes increased time-on-task, opportunities for input, negotiation of meaning and output production, and fosters life-long learning that extends far beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Continued educational collaboration, experimentation and research on virtual worlds will yield even stronger teaching

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24. Shannon Spasova and Molly Thomasy Blasing, "Second Language in Second Life: Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching in a Virtual World," conference presentation at Middlebury College, July 2009.

models for how best to use virtual communities to supplement traditional classroom language instruction.

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#### Реферат

Молли Томаси Блейзинг

Иностранный язык в «Second Life»: Социальное взаимодействие и самоопределение учащихся в виртуальном мире и применение Интернет-пространства в педагогической практике

Как подчеркивается в работах Фирта и Вагнера (1997, 2007), в настоящее время стало необходимым более детальное изучение того, как учащиеся применяют иностранный язык за пределами классной аудитории. В данной статье анализируются социальные взаимодействия студентов, изучающих русский язык как иностранный, в онлайн-мире виртуальном мире под названием «Second Life» ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) и ставится вопрос о способах использования Интернет-пространства в учебных целях. Исследование основывается на новейших разработках в области методики преподавания иностранных языков и оперирует такими понятиями, как "communities of practice"—сообщества людей, объединенных совместной деятельностью (Lave and Wenger 1991), компьютерно-опосредованный дискурс (Thorne 2008), "input and interaction"—ввод языковой информации и социальное взаимодействие (Swain 2000, 2006; Gass 2003) и «эффект потолка» (Rifkin 2005). В статье дается анализ конкретных примеров, полученных автором в результате контролируемого эксперимента со студентами, и демонстрируются потенциальные преимущества и недостатки работы с учащимися в обстановке компьютерно-опосредованной коммуникации. В заключении обсуждаются возможности практического применения виртуального пространства для обучения студентов на различных уровнях владения иностранным языком.



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