Resources

Innovations to help you teach

Using Virtual Worlds

Words Graham Davies, ALL member and Groovy Winkler in Second Life

Calico/Eurocall HQ

In the course of the last 40 years, language teachers have embraced a wide range of new technologies: language labs in the 1960s, microcomputers in the 1970s, multimedia computers in the 1980s and the Web in the 1990s. Now, in the 21st century, we have seen an explosion in Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, podcasts and a growing range of social networking websites. Interactive whiteboards (IWBs) and virtual learning environments (VLEs) are now commonplace in schools and colleges. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is also beginning to have a wider impact with downloadable materials for mobile devices, such as the Rundblick and Portales recordings and transcripts, disseminated free of charge by the Open University via iTunes.

One exciting new development is Second Life, a free 3D virtual world, where thousands of users interact in the guise of their chosen character. Language teachers have already begun to discover the learning opportunities offered by Second Life, for example:

- There are many virtual classrooms in Second Life where it is possible to learn a new language or brush up your knowledge of a language that you already know. The Goethe-Institut, for example, offers free classes in German in Second Life.

- There are many simulations in Second Life that reflect the physical appearance and culture of real countries. Learners exploring these simulations can meet individuals who speak languages other than English and engage with them in voice chat or text chat. Many signs and instructions are posted in the 'local' language, and tours by train, tram or even Roman chariot may be offered with commentaries in different languages.

- Second Life quests – which are similar in many respects to Web quests – are already well established. For example, the teacher may ask learners to search for an object that reflects the culture of a specific country, take a snapshot of it and write an accompanying textual description either in their own language or in the language that they are studying.

- Tasks can be set up in Second Life that simulate real-life tasks. I once observed a session in which a class of language learners was divided into groups and had to set a dinner table for each of their groups by picking up items of food from a large table and transferring them to their smaller tables. They were learning the names of the items of food, understanding instructions and using verbs and prepositions of location and placement. They were also using a great deal of language in the process of collaborating with one another.

A number of EU-funded projects investigating the possibilities of teaching and learning languages in Second life have recently been initiated, for example the AVALON and NIFLAR projects. A Virtual Worlds Special Interest Group (VW SIG) has recently been set up as a joint venture by EUROCALL (Europe) and CALICO (USA), two leading professional associations that provide a focus for the promulgation of innovative research, development and practice relating to the use of new technologies in language learning and teaching. EUROCALL and CALICO maintain a joint headquarters in Second Life. There is also a centre in Second Life for language teachers in primary and secondary education, maintained jointly by ALL London and the MFL

Resources group. There are many educational institutions and commercial companies offering language courses in Second Life, too.

Once considered just an online game, Second Life is now a phenomenon that language teachers have to take seriously. Newcomers to Second Life can find more information in Section 14.2.1 of Module 1.5 at the ICT for Language Teachers website at www.ict4lt.org/en/index.htm

Useful websites for exploring Second Life
ALL London and MFL Resources Centre in Second Life http://slurl.com/secondlife/EduNation/11/127/22
AVALON http://avalon-project.ning.com
British Council, Second Life for Teens www.britishcouncil.org/hongkong-english-secondlife.htm
EUROCALL/CALICO Virtual Worlds Special Interest Group: http://virtualworldssig.ning.com
Goethe-Institut in Second Life http://slurl.com/ secondlife/Goethe%20 Institut/72/151/26
Second Life www.secondlife.com