

A tale of a newbie teacher’s 3D virtual teaching

What this research was about and why it is important

Language teachers and researchers have started to explore the effects of 3D multi-user virtual environments, such as Second Life (SL), on learners’ language outcomes and perceptions. However, language learners have predominantly been the center of research attention, rather than teachers. Empirical studies exploring teacher identities, professional development and beliefs in 3D virtual teaching are relatively scarce. This study vicariously transported the readers to an ESL teacher’s first online teaching journey and vividly documented how she rose to the occasion as a SL newbie teacher. Through her critical teaching reflections in dialogue blogging and interview with the researcher as her mentor, several salient themes emerged: strategies employed to tackle both technical and instructional challenges in SL, reconstruction of online teacher identity, resilience and professional growth, virtual mentoring and best practices for the 3D task design.

What the researchers did

- The ESL teacher consulted with the researcher to address the urgent need of boosting learner motivation and supporting the under-achieving students who were struggling with the oral and written communication skills.
- Motivated by action research, the researcher and the teacher collectively developed an action plan to first help the teacher understand the task design and practice the SL functions in a series of training sessions.
- Guided by the researcher, the teacher tested out the created tasks in SL for further modifications.
- Following the narrative inquiry approach, the researcher created a blog for the teacher to reflect on what worked and didn’t work in her lesson delivery as well as her observations of students’ reactions to each SL task.
- The researcher (mentor) shadowed her closely and provided ongoing supervision by watching her teaching in video-recorded SL sessions and responding to her inquiries posted on the blog entries.
- The researcher conducted a follow-up interview with the teacher after the SL course to further probe into her critical evaluation of the overall SL teaching experience for future course improvement and research implications.

What the researchers found

- Despite the well-planned SL lessons, the fact that students didn’t acquaint themselves with SL functionality outside of class posed challenges in her virtual class management and slowed down the lesson flow.
- Conducting SL sessions in a lab setting was not as organic and ideal as having students attend the SL class remotely. The teacher encountered issues such as microphone echoing (multiple students speaking in the same room or in a close SL vicinity) and student overdependence on teacher’s physical presence.
- Though motivating, meaningful and fun to the students, SL-enabled tasks were also hindered by technical difficulties such as SL platform instability and students’ lack of SL skills.
- The novice SL teacher was able to refine her teaching toolkit and reconstruct her new online teacher identity: her resilience and perseverance propelled her through virtual teaching demands and hurdles.
- Her ongoing dialogue blogging with her mentor (researcher) made virtual mentoring feasible: best practices and evidence-based supervision were fed back into curriculum improvement and online teacher training through action research.

Things to consider

- Teacher action research in the 3D virtual world is still a less charted territory that needs more empirical studies to place the role of teachers back on the key research agenda.
- 3D virtual teaching takes careful lesson planning, piloting and consultation with the domain expert (mentor).
- Worth exploring is how language teachers utilize instructional strategies and technological resources to tackle challenges encountered in SL as novices.
- Equally important is investigating how SL newbies’ online teaching experiences shape (and are shaped by) their teaching beliefs, identities and new understandings, thus fostering their professional development.
- Narrative inquiry empowers language teachers to get their voices/stories heard and allows researchers/audiences to better understand how teachers make sense of their 3D virtual teaching.

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