What happens when Japanese language learners take a course entirely in a 3D virtual world?

What this research was about and why it is important

In the age of digital communication, many students are using technology tools not only to communicate with their peers but also to take part in various tasks and projects in and outside of school settings. Many researchers in the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) are currently exploring the effective use of these technology tools in language classrooms, and 3D virtual world games are not an exception. Previous research has shown that the use of 3D virtual worlds in language classrooms has many potential benefits to student acquisition of target language. However, many researchers have called for more empirical evidence to confirm such claim. This case study serves in this area, gathering empirical evidence to find out what happens when Japanese language learners take a 15-week 3D virtual world-based Japanese advanced conversation course with an instructional approach called Computer-Assisted Learning of Communication (CALC). The results show that students, when immersed in the 3D virtual world of Tokyo, acquired contextualized communicative competence.

What the researchers did

- Participants are 11 undergraduate Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) students enrolled in a semester-based (15-week) advanced conversation course at a public university.
- The class was conducted entirely in the 3D virtual world game called Meet-Me: a 3D simulation of Tokyo with realistic transportation systems and detailed geographical locations.
- Participants received instructions entirely in Japanese with lessons navigated in tandem with the use of a highly visualized workbook as supplemental material (almost like a basic game manual).
- Four sources of data were collected: 1) screen captures of virtual world participation, 2) video recordings of in-class interaction, 3) weekly pre- and post-tests, and 4) collection of target language outputs from assignments and in-class writing.

What the researchers found

- Major finding of the study was that the participants acquired contextualized communicative competence when immersed in the 3D virtual world of Tokyo with an instructional approach of CALC.
- Based on the statistical analysis of vocabulary test, the study found the improvement in the participants’ acquisition of incidentally encountered vocabulary, in particular, kanji pronunciation and vocabulary interpretation.
- Based on the interpretative analysis of data, the study found participants’ acquisition of various discourse patterns such as persuasive talk, awareness of audience and collaborative communication.

Things to consider

- CALC (the 15-week 3D virtual-world based Japanese advanced conversation course) may be effective for students in regards to acquiring vocabulary recognition and certain communicative competence.
- The use of a 3D virtual world in language learning classrooms may offer more situated, immersive and experiential opportunities to teach student how to function in target language speaking countries.
- Students’ learning experiences in a 3D virtual world-based language learning curriculum, if designed well, may be as valuable as going on a study abroad, or even better in the sense that the students could be given a certain anonymity through the use of avatars to avoid social anxiety they may possibly encounter in a face-to-face situation.
- A 3D virtual world-based language learning course may also be a safer, more accessible and less expensive choice for students as it generally requires a lot less resources for universities/educational institutions in regards to program development, execution and integration.