Virtual Worlds for Language Learning: From Theory to PRACTICE
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Virtual worlds for language learning introduces language educators and researchers to a new educational space, one in which the affordances of virtual worlds (VWs) are connected to language learning. The six chapters of the book highlight aspects of VWs to facilitate readers’ general understanding of VWs, emphasize the educational potential of VWs from pedagogical and theoretical perspectives for language learning, introduce exemplary features and usages of VW software, and conclude with possible research applications and future directions of VWs with a list of resources.

To give readers a better understanding of VWs, the first chapter of the book defines them by introducing terms, such as three-dimensional (3-D), computer-based environments, computer-mediated communication (CMC), and virtual reality (VR), using characters and quotes from recent best-selling movies. This creates the impression that the concept of cyberspace is familiar, accessible, and pervasive.

Chapter 2 explores key terms and concepts of technology in education: computer-assisted language learning (CALL), computer-aided instruction (CAI), network-based language teaching (NBLT), telecollaboration for language learning (TlcLL), multiuser virtual environment (MuVE), and massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). This exploration does not only provide an understanding of each key concept, but also prepares readers for educational constructs introduced in Chapter 3, by shifting their attention gradually from their current familiarity with VWs to their academic usage. This is followed by an overview and history of VWs, spanning from Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations
(PLATO) to current popular VWs, such as MMOGs, Second Life (SL), and World of Warcraft. This is complemented by statistical reports of the increase in VW accounts as well as the most popular VWs by age group.

Chapter 3 connects VWs and four existing educational theories: Dewey’s experiential education (1916), Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning, and Long’s (1981) interaction hypothesis. Introductions of each scholar and explanations of their theories connect existing research on CMC and VWs with their pedagogical implementation and, as a result, pave the way for potential applications of technologies to language learning.

Chapter 4 explores Second Life (SL) in particular, by summarizing first survey results on background and nationality, language background and use, and educational experience among SL users. The chapter provides a comprehensive and in-depth review of SL, and an evaluation of its instructional value and popularity as a medium for linguistic variety, telecollaboration, and language practice. The chapter also delineates principal roles of avatars in SL in terms of appearance, movement and interaction, text and voice chat, and nonverbal communication, focusing on the resourceful virtual experience for language learning that SL affords.

Chapter 5 describes SL settings as potential language learning and telecollaboration sites in detail. The descriptions of several virtual educational settings include real-life and SL schools, English City map, English City International airport and its navigation tower; non-traditional educational settings in SL recreate famous locations around the world that provide language practice and culture exposure at the same time. Various snapshots of SL settings in the chapter illustrate possible instructional implementations of SL technologies in class. These can help language teachers understand the challenges and incorporate affordances of VWs and telecollaboration as instructional tools. In addition, pedagogical practices in VWs introduced in the chapter inform readers of research implications on VW collaboration to support intercultural competence, as exemplified by various existing studies conducted on intercultural competency development through collaboration, language exchange, and cultural exchange in SL. This chapter goes on to discuss ‘virtual’ collaboration in teacher education and marketplace simulations. It further stresses a connection between the hands-on nature of VWs and task-based language teaching (TBLT) in SL, which, by definition, includes a work plan with meaning-focused activities, reflects real world communication and situational authenticity, involves any of the four language skills, engages cognitive processes, and has a clearly defined or specified communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003). The chapter ends with a description of the collaborative building tasks in SL actually implemented in a class that fostered authentic negotiation and communication as users maneuvered through features in SL by making choices of textures and colors to create objects.

As a conclusion, Chapter 6 critically examines whether or not VWs serve language learning more effectively than any other forms of CMC in a classroom. Different mechanisms in VWs also necessitate different evaluation criteria for measuring students’ learning. Possible futures of VWs are anticipated with a call to revisit VWs to determine its legitimacy for language learning.

Overall, Virtual Worlds for Language Learning opens a vista on virtual worlds by bringing the reader from general information about the history of VWs to theoretical and pedagogical constructs, pedagogical applications, and in-depth consideration of the potential for language learning in SL. This book may serve to supplement readings for a course on technology-enhanced language learning, to guide teachers who intend to integrate VW into their telecollaboration projects or courses, to understand VWs better from a theoretical and empirical perspective, and to provide ideas to educational content or website developers. Future editions should revise several surface blemishes (e.g., orthographical errors, inaccurate
descriptions of screenshots, names of avatars, etc.). Transitions among ideas need to be more cohesively organized. Other VW software also needs to be examined in depth to allow for a full appreciation of the positive affordances of VWs for language learning.

REFERENCES

REVIEWER’S BIODATA
Jeong-Bin (Hannah) Park is a Ph.D. student in Foreign Language Education program, Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interest focuses on computer-assisted language learning and teaching in hybrid settings, online discourse, computer-mediated discussion, and L2 writing development. She holds an M.A. in Foreign Language Education and a B.A. in English Language and Literature. She has taught ESL/EFL in South Korea and the United States for more than 10 years at various levels.

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