Examining the Potential Integration of Second Life Platform into Iraqi Language Education Programme

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Abstract: As one of the development technologies, the Second Life (SL) platform as virtual world offers English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with unique opportunity of learning authentic language with native speakers and other learners of English in virtual environment. This paper aims at reviewing the research about SL platform as an educational tool to provide afocus and description of its key features and capabilities and how these features might be used in an online synchronous simulated environment to support the learning ofEFL in Iraq. There exist the problem of unsatisfactory achievement and the lack of opportunity to practice in English as well as the limited support of enhancing oral communication skills and an interactive learning environment. This paper is devoted to discovering the possibilities of using SL as an education tool in promoting Iraqi EFL and address the issues cited.

Keywords: Communication Skills; EFL Learning; Second Life; Virtual World.

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language and has played a crucial role in the communication of every human. Thus, in this globalization world, helping students to learn English effectively is a great importance. In Iraq, English is considered one of the major foreign languages taught in schools and universities. It has been taught as a compulsory subject from primary school up to university. Twelve years of school study English has not made Iraqi students mastery over English. Therefore, learning English has always been a great challenge for EFL students[1].

In Iraq like other EFL countries, with traditional learning classrooms, students have limited opportunities for using English communication and meaningful interaction in authentic English situation [2]. [3] and [4]have pointed out that students who spend their time in learning English with traditional learning methods are unable to actively use English language as well as enhance their communication skills.

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has led to the introduction of e-learning system in the field of education. E-learning focuses of introduce and use new and advanced technologies in the field of education. It offers more learning resources and more opportunities to allow students and teachers to communicate, collaborate and interact with and among each other without regard to physical location[5]. Therefore, with the goal of constructing an interactive learning environment where students have an opportunity for conversational interaction with native speakers and non-native speakers, Second Life platform as educational tool is suggested for integration with traditional learning in Iraqi EFL classroom on the basis of relevant theory and research.

II. TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN IRAQ

The English language is taught as a foreign language in Iraq, the major purpose of which is to use it as a necessary tool for international communication. Despite the fact that learning of English as a foreign language has occupied an important place in the Iraqi education system [6] the level of achievement of many learners remains unsatisfactory and below expected levels. In other words, many learners leave schools unable to communicate and convey their meanings in English.

According to [7]EFL teaching in Iraq was based on the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) of language teaching. In GTM, the instructor's role is to explain grammar rules and meaning of words in the student's native language, organize practice, and correct student's mistakes whereas the student's role is to pay careful attention to the instructor's explanations, and corrections, memorize rules and vocabulary list, and carefully do the practice tasks the instructor's sets[8].[3]mentions that in the grammar translation method, learners typically spend years learning English and yet many of them are still unable to use the language effectively.

In their study, [2]point out that Education system in Iraq is still working with the traditional face-to-face classroom. [9] stated that traditional language learning is not an effective method for enhancing learners' participation, interaction and communication competence. The role of the teacher in the classroom is to explain and disseminate information to the students. There is no opportunity for the students to practise their language skills other than receiving input and answering questions in exams. Students are not encouraged to be independent and autonomous in different tasks to express their ideas or discuss facts[7]. Therefore, educators, administrators and curriculum developers have the responsibility to pay attention to this shortcoming in order to improve English learning in Iraq. They must be keen and able to select the most appropriate approaches to teach English to Iraqi EFL learners in order for their English performance to meet the international demands and be able to fully and successfully participate in the

international community. In this regard, this study would like to integrate Second Life platform as a tool to aid the traditional education method in learning English for Iraqi EFL learner.

III. INTERACTION IN SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

Constructivism is a theory of Knowledge which has its roots in philosophy, psychology and other disciplines and its objective is to clarify how students are able to know the world [10]. Many researchers have applied Vygotsky's social constructivist theory to second and foreign language teaching and learning[11]. These researchers have emphasized the significant role that social and cultural context play in the process of language learning and the importance of participating in meaningful communication activities with other members of a speaking community.

The role of interaction has been emphasised by the social-constructivist learning theory rooted by Lee Vygotsky's work. [12]pointed out that learning occurs through interaction. He suggested that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and is then appropriated by learners. He also asserts that the concept of development of the learners' learning could not be understood without reference to the social and cultural context in which these concepts are embedded. Therefore, social constructivism requires one primary element; two or more learners. Those learners must be involved in some form of interaction for knowledge to be constructed. They make meanings through the interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

IV. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING/TEACHING

Task-based language learning (TBLL), also known as task-based language teaching (TBLT) focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking learners to do significant tasks using the target language (L2). TBLL is an approach in which communicative and meaningful tasks play an important role in language learning and in which the process of using language in communication carries more importance than the production of correct language forms. This makes TBLL especially useful for developing L2 fluency and learner confidence. Thus, TBLL is seen as one model of communicative language teaching (CLT) in terms of regarding authentic meaningful communication as the primary goal of language learning[8].

Empirical studies and theoretical motivation in task-based language learning has been prompted by proposals for task-based language teaching (TBLT)[13]. TBLT can be defined as a teaching approach which is based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. It is an extension of the characteristics of CLT and the attempt by its supporters to apply the principles of target language to teaching. It focuses on language acquisition, language itself, and language performance simultaneously. Yet another major point about task based teaching is its being students centered and enhances students' confidence and enthusiasm[14].

TBLT is defined as teaching/learning that is completely based on tasks. The concept of tasks as meaningful and useful activities is closely related to the principle of learning by doing, where learners are encouraged to learn experientially [15]and put into practice and use what they learn. A task is generally described as an activity that requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective[16]. Furthermore, a task refers to a language learning attempt that requires students to comprehend, manipulate and produce the L2 as they perform the set task, involving real-life language[8].

According to [15]tasks involve focusing on utilizing four language skills, real-world language use, and the activation of the cognitive process. In addition [3]clarifies that working with tasks requires paying specific attention to the meaning rather than to the form. Therefore, tasks are activities in which the L2 is used for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome. [17]clarified that for tasks to be designed in computer mediated communication environments, they must be structured appropriately. The researchersummarised four significant factors that must be taken into consideration when designating learning communicative tasks. 1) Tasks must have two dimensions; the interactional activity that involves communicative information;and the communication target that involves target orientation and outcome options. 2) Two-way information-gap tasks create more discussion work than one-way information-gap ones, because imperfect information is held by each learner who needs to collaborate and exchange information to complete a task. 3) Communication within small groups produces more input in the target language of a kind where students have more opportunities to modify their interaction. 4) Closed, convergent, difficult tasks create more discussions of meaning than open, divergent, easy ones.

All the definitions above emphasize that task is an activity that involves language students to use language through communicative purpose to achieve an outcome where meaning is the main focus rather than the form. Therefore, instructors have to develop new ways to attract learners' attention to the tasks in order to motivate them. Tasks should be developed depending on the goals due to appropriately selected tasks that increase learners' motivation. Second Life may provide an effective learning environment for EFL learners beyond the traditional learning environment.

V. POINTS OF INTERSECTION

Teaching EFL in Iraq requires focus on improving learners' communication in English and constructing an interactive EFL learning environment. In this context,

more attention must be given to speaking and communication activities. Drilling in grammatical structure, memorizing rules and vocabulary lists should be given minor significance if the target of the lesson can be achieved interactively. Iraqi instructors have been found to follow traditional approaches that focus on translation, writing and reading, and to neglect speaking. Consequently, learners in such teacher-fronted environments that neglect interaction to use English as a tool of communication are deprived. Therefore, the Iraqi EFL classroom needs to be released from such an environment by taking into consideration the social constructivist theory which emphasises knowledge that is constructed in social interaction. Since the advance of technology, research on Second Life as a tool of CALL has revealed various advantages over traditional learning interaction.

In the Second Life environment, learners are presented with 3 dimensional objects and are sometimes "closer" than in real life. The authenticity of the experience qualifies learners to think critically, beyond abstract images or descriptions in text[18]. Furthermore, it offers a rich environment in which learners can strongly interact with one another and increase learners' motivations for language learning[19].

VI. WHAT IS SECOND LIFE?

Second Life (SL, Linden research, Inc., San Francesco, USA) is the most common example of the last generation of 3D virtual world. SL is defined as an online synchronous three-dimensional virtual world (also referred to as a Multi-Users Virtual Environment, or MUVE) was launched in 2003 to be available on the Internet. It invites users with the following statements "Enter a world with infinite possibilities and live a life without boundaries, guided only by your imagination"[20]. Linden Lab has generated Second Life platform filled with the objects, adventures and experiences of the individuals using Second Life. People enter SL for various purposes including, but not limited to meeting other people, working, educating and being educated and having fun along the way[21].

In SL users create avatars that represent them in virtual world. The avatars, much like in the real world, can do anything- buy their own land, build their houses, rent, go to work, go to dance, go to university, get married, and do various other activities on different islands. In other words, SL is a digital presence consisting of a multitude of islands which can be broken up, to be bought and sold by avatars. The currency in SL is Linden $, with an exchange rate of 1 US$ equal approx.: 260 L$. Thus, the environment within Second Life is an imitation of reality[22]. Regarding communication, the avatars can communicate with others through traditional text chats or the use the more recent incorporation of voice chat[23].

SL has also the ability to record actions that take place within SL. In this case, learners have the opportunity to assess and reflect on their personal performances and interactions with others by viewing their own recorded video clips in SL[24].

Furthermore, SL allows students to create a persona (animals, human or something in between) and interact with others, who are in the same environment at the same time, and change their appearance through changing their clothing, hair colour, dresses within the environment[25]. At the same time, these are not the only things that can be manipulated in SL audio or video clips. Power points presentations can also be uploaded into SL and attached to certain objects. Note cards that contain any information that a teacher desires can be attached to any object in Second Life and recaptured with a click of the mouse. Additionally, words or phrases can be attached to objects as floating script, so the students would not even need to click on an object to get a written version of its corresponding words[23]. Therefore, it helps learners to explore the lessons that they have learned, and help them to practice situations which may be inflexible in the traditional classroom. Currently, SL is being used by many educational institutions as a way to engage students in immersive educational environments. This crucial method of teaching in SL is a combination of theory and practice together with distinctiveness of environment [23].

In short, the interaction of activities using the SL virtual environment platform allows EFL learners to talk in English through personified virtual characters. Hence, it will encourage learning willingness and enhance interactive learning[26]. Second Life is a very useful tool for language learners as it gives them the unique opportunity to use their language skills with other learners and native speakers. This is especially for learners who have a dearth of opportunities to use, hear, and practise English in real life.

VII. WHY SECOND LIFE?

One of the most successful ways to learn a second or foreign language is to participate in a community in which the target language is used to communicate in a real environment[27]. The communication with other learners or native speakers of the target language has been recognized as an essential part of the learning process[28].The advantage of conversation in authentic situations is invaluable to language learners[29].

Therefore, SL has emerged as a platform learning in an educational setting due to its ability to create authentic learning conditions where learners can meet and hold authentic dialogues in a simulated environment, giving individuals a sense of 'being there'[30].Thus, learners' engagement with course content and sense of community with the class can be improve utilizing interactions within Second Life as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Language learning in Second Life.

Moreover, Second Life can be utilized to make the learning more interesting and attractive with the purpose of improving foreign language learning due to its immersive and interactive environment. According to[31], Second Life is a very useful tool for foreign language learners because it gives them the meaning opportunity to practise language with native speakers and non-native speakers of English from all over the world. In this regards, more than 100 universities in US and other countries own or rent virtual land in SL. Thus, it is possible to be an important learning tool in the education system due to its interactive and animated features. By interacting with the objects (avatars), learners have the meaningful opportunity to practice, observe their action and learn by doing[1].

CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced Second Life as a potential educational tool for enhancing Iraqi students' English communication skills. It focuses on Second Life as an educational environment which may offer various advantages and benefits to learners and teachers. It is predicted that learners will progress and participate in interactive activities and engage in educational discourses that will improve the English communication skills. Second Life is a unique opportunity for learners. It allows learners to interact with native speakers and other learners through avatars in the environment and can produce new experiences that may be difficult to present in the physical world. It can foster synchronous interaction with teacher, students and other learners. It can also foster performance based on training like vocabulary, skills, and grammar similar to the use of computer assisted language learning devices. SL provides an effective learning environment for EFL learners beyond the traditional learning environment. Teachers of English language can utilize SL in their teaching to supplement the traditional face-to-face learning.

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