Second Life as a Virtual Playground for Language Education: A Practical Guide for Teaching and Research

Second Life as a Virtual Playground for Language Education: A Practical Guide for Teaching and Research			
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With the growth of digital technology, human interaction has grown beyond traditional faceto-face settings and now includes contexts as diverse as 3D multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs). Interestingly, MUVEs can even be the site of language learning and development, allowing students to freely interact with each other and create their own content. Since the launch of one particular MUVE—Second Life—in 2003, a body of literature (e.g., Wang et al., 2020) has shown that effective use of MUVEs for foreign/second language (L2) education can lead to a range of linguistic and affective gains (e.g., heightened motivation). *Second Life as a Virtual Playground for Language Education: A Practical Guide for Teaching and Research*, written by Julian Chen, addresses the need for practical resources for language educators to meaningfully engage L2 learners in online environments. Based on relevant theory, empirically supported evidence, and practical experience, Chen details how to design tasks, run classes, and conduct research in Second Life.

The book is divided into three parts, with a total of 21 chapters. Part 1 (*Before We Take Off*) explains in detail what Second Life is, how it has been used in L2 education, and the positive and negative findings that emerged from the literature. It explores and synthesizes the body of research that surrounds MUVEs. It situates the research in digital game-based learning and

task-based language teaching (TBLT). Chen shows a strong understanding of TBLT by constructing a theoretical framework for the study based on influential TBLT research (e.g., Ellis, 2018; Long, 2016). Part 1 finishes by teaching the reader how to use Second Life while introducing a wide range of features, leaving the reader knowledgeable about Second Life and the literature surrounding its use.

Part 2 (*Let's Get Our Hands Dirty*), which makes up the majority of the book, focuses on practical applications of Second Life. Most of the chapters include five sections: *Overview*, *Blog post*, *Lessons learned*, *Checkpoint*, and *Your task*. The blog post details the task and the experience of completing the task. The task types (e.g., presentations, role plays, interviews) and topics (e.g., food, music, art) are similar to those that are found in standard face-to-face classes. However, Chen leverages the flexibility and open-world nature of Second Life to create novel tasks such as teleporting students to areas of interest in the Second Life world to act as tour guides, or building 3D objects by following instructions from peers. The ability to perform tasks in this manner is a great benefit of the approach. Students' dialogues that were used during tasks are often presented in the blog posts. This allows the reader to understand the linguistic capacity of the tasks and the students. In the *Lessons learned* sections, Chen reflects on the tasks by detailing what was learnt and what could be improved. The *Checkpoint* sections ask challenging questions to the reader related to the research context, applied linguistics, or the task design. The *Your task* sections give the reader some tasks to achieve in their own Second Life teaching context. The *Checkpoint* and *Your task* sections are a great addition as they transform the book into an active learning experience for the reader.

Part 3 (*Weave It All Together*) provides external resources about research and resources pertaining to Second Life. Chen first provides a list of publications relating to research on Second Life, thus allowing the reader to dive into more technical resources surrounding the efficacy and use of this tool in language education settings. Chen concludes the section by providing an annotated list of resources for teachers and researchers who are interested in using Second Life. There are links to websites that provide further information regarding getting started in Second Life, Second Life-related conferences and social networking, alternative virtual language teaching environments, academic journals that subsume Second Life related studies, and Second Life researchers and specialists.

Overall, the major strength of this book is the amount of useful information it provides to researchers and teachers interested in exploring the use of MUVEs in L2 contexts. For example, Chen's detailed reflections after each lesson in Part 2 highlight areas of interest to consider that would only otherwise be known by actually teaching or researching in a MUVE. The structure and the tone of the writing are also strengths of the book. Chen effectively caters to readers who may not have prior knowledge of the subject matter, allowing them to effortlessly comprehend what could potentially be an overwhelming deluge of information. It is also helpful that many color screenshots are used throughout to clearly show the reader how the Second Life experience is shown on the screen. Furthermore, it is praiseworthy that Chen does not shy away from presenting the challenges that arise when working with technology, in addition to highlighting its advantages. Chen showed how Second Life can be a beneficial medium for TBLT by allowing students the autonomy to express themselves in meaningful situations. Even though the approach and tasks in the book would be too difficult for low-level L2 learners, teachers could edit the tasks depending on student level and lesson goals.

There are a few shortcomings to address. First, setting up Second Life for use in a language course is a time-consuming endeavor with many factors to consider. Teachers may be able to achieve better results using more standard and simple approaches to language teaching. The book details a range of benefits to the use of Second Life; however, it would have been beneficial if Chen also provided an argument as to why this approach might not be suitable. Second, even though Second Life still has a large user base, and it continues to be updated (Mmo stats, 2023), it was created in 2003, which means it is now legacy software. Future updates to Second Life could render Chen's walk-through showing how to set up and use Second Life out-of-date if the interface changes. Finally, Chen's blog posts are at times too detailed and may overwhelm teachers looking for practical teaching guidance. On the other hand, the details would be of interest to junior researchers who are curious as to the research journey of a postgraduate research student.

To sum up, *Second Life as a Virtual Playground for Language Education: A Practical Guide for Teaching and Research* is a well-researched and well-written book, and it would be indispensable for educators and researchers interested in exploring MUVEs in the L2 classroom. Many of the findings from this book are applicable to current (e.g., Minecraft) and future (e.g., Metaverse) Second Life alternatives. As the world becomes increasingly more online, more and more novel pedagogical approaches such as the one presented in this book are needed to engage students in communicative language learning. This book encourages teachers and researchers to try new pedagogical tools.

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