Expédition aux Terres Australes

A Web-based Online Role-play Simulation: the enhancement of language acquisition through social interaction

by

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2004

A report of an investigation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Education at Murdoch University
DECLAREATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content, work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Andrée Vanda Barbara Hartley

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Date: 12th November, 2004
ABSTRACT

This research project investigates to what extent a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning online can enhance the use of language acquisition for learners of foreign languages. I designed an online role-play simulation in which the students sailed on the expedition of Nicolas Baudin to Australia and took different authentic roles on a simulated voyage. All communication was conducted in the French language, thus enabling the students to interact in realistic conversations, relevant to this historic event. Being in a third year TAFE French class, the students had already been exposed to sound grounding in grammar, relevant vocabulary, and use of colloquial and idiomatic expressions, and thus they had acquired a reasonably high level of proficiency in the language.

The study was conducted over a four-week period in which I examined the intense interaction between the participants, while fulfilling the role of facilitator/moderator. In this role, I gave clear guidelines as to what was expected from the participants; provided the students with their identity which was unknown to the other participants during the simulation; created incidents through a weekly “Course of Events” announcement; answered all questions within 12 – 24 hours; encouraged engagement within the learning community; made occasional suggestions if the characters seemed uncertain of what to do next; and, above all, endeavoured to create a non-threatening, friendly online environment for the students.

After the four-week online role-play simulation, the participants met for a debriefing session in which they revealed their identities and discussed any issues, in particular technical issues, that had emerged. This provided an opportunity for the participants to disengage from the virtual world in which they have been immersed for four weeks as well as an opportunity to reflect upon their personal learning.

A qualitative methodology, drawing on interpretive research, was employed to analyse the data. Student pre- and post-questionnaires, online contributions by the students and the debriefing discussion were used as the major sources of data collection.

Most of the students took up the challenge of interacting online through asynchronous and synchronous communication. The study focused on how the use of a social constructivist epistemology could enhance language acquisition for learners of foreign languages and also analysed to what extent did the students’ participation in a web-based online role-play simulation affect their communication skills and fluency in the second language.

The findings provided me with guidance for future implementation of online role-play simulations in which I would ensure that all students have the basic computer skills and necessary access to internet in order to participate fully in the simulation. Nevertheless, this study demonstrated many benefits to the language enhancement of the participants and will become a regular activity as it permits students to use their conversational skills in a “real-life” virtual learning community.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A research project such as a web-based online role-play simulation is not created without assistance from many sources and I should like to thank all those concerned. Firstly, a thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Dorit Maor, who not only guided me throughout the year with encouragement and a positive attitude but took a genuine interest in the research.

This project would not have been possible without my digital interpreter, Victoria Alonso, who guided this digital immigrant through the online minefield of possibilities until the seed of Baudin's online role-play simulation was born, and then stayed on board until the end of the voyage. My gratitude also goes to Albi Clough, Wen Tsai Lim and Louise Schofield.

The attractive WebCT site was set up by James Taylor and Mary Aquino of the Academic Support Group at Central TAFE in Perth, Western Australia. A special thanks to the students who enthusiastically participated and contributed to the success of the research.

A big thank you to my family who supported me and especially to my daughter, Renée-Claire Hartley, for her help.

Un grand remerciement à ma famille : mon mari, Peter, qui m’a soutenue ces trois dernières années ; mon fils, Mark, qui m’a encouragée de loin car il est en Europe ; et ma fille, Renée-Claire, qui a démontré une patience immense en lisant ma thèse plusieurs fois et en vérifiant des données.

Merci à tous !
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