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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Come si fa? Can virtual worlds help us promote Intercultural Awareness?

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Abstract

This paper describes the author's experience with a pilot course of Italian in SL^{®2}. The course is part of a PhD research on *Exploring the potential of virtual worlds to promote Intercultural Awareness in students learning Italian as a Foreign Language*. In the paper the author will justify her choice of virtual worlds for the development of language competence and Intercultural Awareness and will present some results of her activity theoretical analysis of the data. Problematic areas and potential moments for the development of Intercultural Awareness were highlighted during the analysis.

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Keywords: virtual worlds; foreign language learning, affordances, activity theory, intercultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Educational European policy makers stress the importance of cultural competence when learning a foreign language (FL), (Heyward, 2002, Kjartansson & Skopinskaja, 2003, Starkey, 2007), and socio-cultural competence has long been recognised as a structural component of communicative competence. Many language teachers, however, find that constraints of time do not allow them to spend time on the language cultural aspects. Also, contacts with native speakers are not always easy to attain and travel abroad is not affordable for all. This scenario makes computer-mediated communication (CMC) a valuable tool in FL teaching and for the development of Intercultural Awareness (Belz, 2002, 2003; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Chapelle, 2007; Dickey, 2005; O'Dowd, 2003; Thorne, 2005, 2006; Warschauer, 1997, 2000). Virtual worlds, in particular, have been very popular in the past years and educators and researchers in different fields see them as an exciting arena for learning.

1.1. Reasons for using virtual worlds

Features of virtual worlds, such as synchronicity, persistency, the opportunity to collaboratively change the environment and the use of avatars can be exploited as affordances³ for language learning. Synchronic communication can foster interaction and collaboration, which, in turn, may create additional conditions for learning (Schroeder, 2008). Furthermore, where synchronous communication makes interaction more realistic, asynchronous communication offers the educator a way to record and study that interaction.

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³ Lee (2009) defines affordances as: "relationships between the properties of an educational intervention and the characteristics of the learner that enable certain kinds of learning to take place".

The persistency of a virtual environment, that changes and evolves without the user's presence, can create a sense of expectancy and contribute to that illusion of reality which is at the base of a strong sense of presence (Ondrejka, 2005; Riva et al., 2009). Moreover, collaborative work using an avatar favours identification with the avatar and immersion in the world to the point that only by being able to collaborate and construct together with other avatars, users of virtual worlds see their own avatars as 'self-meaningful and believable' (Lim, 2009, p.4).

2. The SL® course

The author collaborated in the planning, design and running of a Second Life® (SL®) course of Italian. Here are the details of the course:

Developers: Susanna Nocchi and Carmen Dell'Aria (University of Palermo) who was conducting her own research on the data. Four of Ms. Dell'Aria's Italian students of Teaching Technologies collaborated in the set-up of the course and took part in the language tasks.

Participants: Second year Irish students of Italian in the International Business and Languages (IBL) degree at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland. The students' FL competence was A1 to B1 lower of CEFR.⁴All students had home access to SL®.

Academic background: IBL is a 4 year course with 50% business and 50% foreign language content. Its third year is spent in the country of the student's foreign language (Erasmus Programme). During their permanence abroad students attend and take exams in a foreign university. The SL® course was offered as a 40% assessment for a second year module, Level 9P; a year-long module that aims at preparing DIT students for their year abroad, by equipping them with the necessary language, information and intercultural skills needed. The course took place in the spring of 2010.

Intended learning outcomes: to get students acquainted with some of the situations they may encounter in Italy, provide them with domain related vocabulary and immerse them in an Italian setting with native Italian speakers.

Course structure: 6 sessions of about 90 minutes, once a week. Each session was taught through Italian, had a different cultural theme, took place within a different environment and provided various tasks: role-plays, conversation, simulation, quizzes and games. Most tasks required interaction with Italian native speakers.

2.1. Data collection

The data were varied: a collaborative wiki with reading material, vocabulary, videos and questionnaires; a short document with questions about the students' experience online and their expectations regarding the SL® course, the recordings of the sessions and individual end-of-course semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

3. Method

The data were analysed using an activity theoretical framework. Activity theory is valuable for CMC analysis as it reckons with the multi-layered structure of computer-supported activities, taking into account their context, their development and the pivotal role of mediation in shaping both the activity and human cognition (Engeström, Y. 1999, 2001). Learning is an extremely complex activity and only an in-depth analysis of what happens during such activity can shed light on it and provide ideas for improvement. Activity theory was used to observe the SL® course and the institutional background against which it was organised, the different sessions and each task in them. Due to space limitation the paper will give a general description of the role of contradictions in an activity system and will analyse one excerpt from one task.

3.1. The session as an activity and the role of contradictions

The course, each session and each task were observed as activity systems, highlighting occurrences of tension and problematic areas. Contradictions are a key concept in activity theory; they can occur within and between activity systems and come to the surface as disturbances, breakdowns, deviations from the activity or even innovations in the activity itself (Engeström, R., 1995; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008; Brine & Franken, 2006; Brown & Cole, 2002; Basharina, 2007). Identifying a contradiction in the activity system and the resulting disruptions helps to pin point moments of potential

⁴ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

change which may result in development. This can provide valuable insight into the activity itself and useful ideas for good practice and improvement.

4. Data analysis

The highest number of disruptions was observed in communication between the subjects. These were caused by poor language competence or by poor intercultural awareness on the part of the subjects. The researcher identified 4 general types of disruption that triggered a clear breakdown or a discontinuation in the flow of communication; comprehension problems, choice of an incorrect term/phrase, poor lexical competence, and use of incorrect register. The disruptions were often resolved through the intervention of other participants. In some instances they revealed a contradiction in the activity system that, even when unresolved, prompted ideas for course and task design.

4.1. One example

The following exchange occurred during a role-play. *Ant* is an Italian student playing the role of a university employee and *A* is an Irish student at the orientation office, looking for information about his course. *M* and *Su* are the Italian lecturers. The dialogue was originally in Italian.

Ant – **Good evening** (*formal*), can I help you?
A – **Hi** (*informal*)
Ant – **Good evening** (*formal*), can I help you?
A – **Good evening** (*formal*)
Ant – Can I help you?
A – I would like to **record** (*A uses the verb registrare*) for the course here.
(*A's voice is not clear*)
Ant – Can you repeat please? I can't hear.
A – I would like to **record** for the course here.
M – I don't know what he would like. I didn't get it clearly.
Ant – Right.
Su – He wants to register. **Record** (*registrare*) is not right; it's **register** (*iscrivermi*).
M – But **you are not at the registration office**, A.
Ant – He's probably not sure about which course to choose. So he wants information on the courses.
Ant – Can you hear me?
A – Yes.
Ant – **You should get information of the courses**.
A – Ok. **Which classes do you have?** Which classes do you have in economics?

During this short exchange *A* approaches the employee using the **wrong register**. After *Ant*'s reply *A* switches to the correct form. This brings to the fore a weakness in the students' intercultural competence, a contradiction between him and the language he is using. Occurrences of this kind were common and were often solved with the help of the native speakers, who changed their role in the activity to become 'expert'.

Later a technical problem and the student's poor language competence, cause a breakdown in communication, which is solved by the two lecturers. The object of the activity shifts from 'completion of the task' to a focus on cultural and lexical issues and, again, brings about a change in the participants' roles.

5. Conclusions

An initial conclusion is that virtual worlds offer a rich potential to create tasks for the development of intercultural awareness. An activity theoretical observation of the sessions and tasks highlighted instances of disruption in communication. Such tensions showed, in some cases, an underlying contradiction in the observed activity, which, when the tensions were solved, created potential moments for language learning and intercultural awareness.

A shift in the focus of the activity and in the role of the participants prompted a change in the activity itself. In other occasions similar breakdowns caused a move from individual to group action, often instantiated by the lecturers. During the sessions, affordances and constraints of the virtual world came to the fore and were noted by the researcher as useful points for further task design.

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