

PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN USING *SECOND LIFE* FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate prospective teachers' experiences in utilizing *Second Life* for learning English, differentiating between personal use of the said virtual world for learning the English language and its potential use for teaching English in the future. The results showed that the students perceived the use of *Second Life* to be beneficial for communication in English and they regarded it as a great source of the target language vocabulary. They also found it useful in practicing writing skills and learning new words and phrases. The use of the said world allowed the students to point out some disadvantages. Among other things, they included the incorrect use of English by some *Second Life* users, problems with finding people to talk with and rude behavior. In addition, the study participants did not regard *Second Life* as useful in developing oral skills or grammar. Finally, the findings revealed the prospective teachers' willingness to use *Second Life* for teaching speaking and writing skills as well as the target language vocabulary. A selection of the students' proposals of language activities to be used in a virtual world is also offered.

Keywords: Second Life; teacher training; virtual worlds

1. Introduction

The use of modern technologies in learning and teaching a foreign/second language is the norm nowadays in a great number of schools, universities and various educational institutions. It should be noted, however, that for a number of language teachers who have joined the teaching profession a long time ago, the use of computer technology constitutes a problem and they are frequently reluctant to apply it in the foreign language classroom. Moreover, these teachers coexist with 'digital natives', i.e. "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001: 1). It has to be remembered, however, that there is a great number of teachers who, similar to 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001), have become "fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology" (Prensky, 2001: 1-2) in their own teaching practices. Finally, there are 'digital

native teachers' (Krajka, 2012: 39) who were born into the digital world and they "display similar computer practices as their digital native students" (Krajka, 2012: 39). They are becoming foreign language teachers of today and tomorrow.

Since the literature related to virtual worlds in the Polish educational context is not very extensive (Topol, 2016), the study reported in this article aims to offer insights into the issue of using one of the most popular and the well-known virtual worlds, i.e. *Second Life*, for learning/teaching English by a sample of present-day Polish students of English philology. The students are both learners of the English language and 'digital natives'. In addition to this, they are prospective English teachers or, as indicated above, future 'digital native teachers'. In view of the fact that *Second Life* (or any other virtual world) offers a lot of opportunities for learning a target language and thus can become a useful vehicle for learning and teaching a foreign/second language, the study participants were asked to use this virtual world for learning English and then present their opinions on the use of the world in question for both learning and teaching English.

2. Review of literature

According to Zheng and Newgarden (2011: 31), virtual worlds can be described as "metaverses where avatars interact with one another and with software agents in a three dimensional space that exists as a metaphor for the real world". Virtual worlds' users exist by means of their own personal avatars, i.e. graphical, three-dimensional representations of real people (Topol, 2011), or users' 3D graphic representations through which they interact with other people in virtual worlds (Wang, Song, Xia & Yan, 2009). In addition to this, Topol (2013) claims that avatars are always graphical representations of real persons, they are three-dimensional and they move in the three-dimensional space. Avatars are interactive but their interactions with other avatars are, in fact, interactions among real people behind their avatars. Avatars are social units and they associate with different cultures and subcultures for the reason that serious virtual worlds are multinational and multicultural environments.

Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>), one of the largest and best-known virtual worlds, is a medium that offers a rich environment for learning and teaching foreign/second languages. Unlike a traditional language classroom with chairs, desks, a board and sometimes computer equipment, virtual worlds provide experiential space in which students learn by doing and observe the results of their actions (Chee, 2007) and a simulation of space, i.e. the ability to project a simulation of 3D space or spatial aspect (cf. Hew & Cheung, 2010). Virtual worlds can perform a dual function: they are both an educational tool and an

immersive learning environment (Topol, 2016). As stated by Sobkowiak (2011), a huge communicative and didactic potential is embedded in a virtual world. This is because language learners can meet other learners from different cultures and time zones, students are forced to move in a space and use a foreign language in order to look for help, communication concerns authentic activities (e.g. walking, running), a rich linguistic-functional interaction takes place between teachers and learners and between learners, finally, language mistakes are ignored or saved for analysis on condition that they do not impede communication (Sobkowiak, 2011: 126). Furthermore, Sobkowiak (2011, 2012) observes that, among other things, virtual worlds afford full immersion in the target language reality, a fully multisensory and multimedia communicative experience, virtual authenticity of language and communication activities, simulation of sceneries for communication activities, anytime/anyplace learning, creation of virtual identity and augmentation of places or objects with a possibility of adding relevant information.

As regards *Second Life*, Wang et al. (2009: 2) claim that this online environment is “a friendly, appealing, and contextually relevant space for native speakers of a target language to interact with language learners”. This, according to the researchers, provides language learners with occasions to use a foreign language to native speakers in realistic, authentic, and relevant places and situations. This stands in contrast to other means available on the “‘flat’ internet” (Sobkowiak, 2012) in view of the fact that virtual worlds may include 3D representations of shops, offices, business meetings, sport events and language classrooms.

It has to be noted that virtual worlds offer language learners the opportunity to communicate by means of text messages, they can carry out audio conversations and use non-verbal communication, i.e. gestures (e.g. they can wave, yawn). Teachers and language learners may also video record their actions in *Second Life* in order to review and reflect on their language performance with other *Second Life* users. This is important for the reason that, in general, the use of video recording proves to be beneficial for language learners (Ebrahimi, 2013). The recordings allow teachers and researchers to examine their students’ performance in detail both from the linguistic and social communication viewpoints (Wang et al., 2009: 3). As for text chat conversations, Wang et al. (2009) claim that interactions based on text carried out in *Second Life* are likely to help language learners improve their speaking skills. This is so because text-based online communication shares a lot of features with spoken rather than written discourse (Górska, 2007).

Despite the benefits of virtual worlds just mentioned, they also suffer from a number of disadvantages. Among other things, Chittaro and Ranon (2007) point out difficulties in

navigation and the use of 3D interfaces, teachers' lack of expertise and problems in classroom use, students' disappointments, hardware problems and costs. Similarly, Sarac (2014) enumerates the following groups of challenges of using *Second Life* in teaching a foreign language: technical (e.g., lack of compatibility with mobile devices), financial (e.g., high cost of equipment) and user-related (e.g., designing the virtual environment takes a lot of time).

The study whose results are reported below is part of a body of research projects devoted to the use of virtual worlds in learning and teaching, including a foreign/second language. The outcomes of these studies demonstrated, for example, users' perceptions of the use of virtual worlds and their attitudes towards the said worlds (e.g., Blasing, 2010; Hislope, 2008; Sarac, 2014; Wang et al., 2009), a positive impact of virtual worlds on oral communication (e.g., Lan, Kan, Sung & Chang, 2016), language learners' motivation (e.g., Kruk, 2015a), levels of foreign language anxiety (e.g., Balcikanli, 2012; Wehner, 2014; Wehner, Gump & Downey, 2011) and the development of learner autonomy (e.g., Kruk, 2014).

The findings of some other research projects also showed that virtual worlds can be successfully implemented in language instruction in order to develop a variety of language skills and subsystems among foreign/second language students (e.g., Kruk, 2015b, 2015c; Peterson, 2006; Topol, 2013). Finally, it should also be noted that virtual worlds were utilized for providing on-campus teaching practice for student teachers (Dalgarno, Gregory, Knox & Reiners, 2016) or preparing pre-service teachers for teaching in virtual schools (Grono, Masters & Gregory, 2015).

In view of the fact that modern technologies have become an inseparable part of contemporary language learners' daily life, language teachers should try to implement them into foreign/second language instruction. They should learn how to use them, including new areas such as virtual worlds, for foreign/second language learning/teaching purposes. This is because a virtual world can become a useful and resourceful extension of a foreign language classroom and can offer new language learning experiences. As stated above, the paper intends to contribute to research in the domain of virtual worlds by presenting the findings of a study which sought to investigate the prospective teachers' views on the use of *Second Life* for learning and teaching English as a foreign language.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Fifteen second-year students of English philology completed the questionnaire. The study participants, all of whom were females¹, were regular students and attended a number of classes (e.g., practical English, foreign language methodology, literature, linguistics, cultural studies). All of them intended to enter the teaching profession and become teachers of English. Their mean age was 21.53 years, with a range of 20 to 26 years. The majority of the students (11 – 73.3%) described their level of advancement as pre-advanced while 4 (26.7%) as advanced. In addition, as found from the background questionnaire, the participants had been learning the English language for about 12 years, which points to the fact that most of them had started their formal English instruction at elementary school. Finally, it should be noted that the students experienced digital technology (e.g., they read Internet websites in English, watched online movies in English, used online communicators in order to talk to speakers of English) but they did not use virtual worlds with the aim of studying English.

3.2. Design and procedure

The study was conducted over the period of one semester in 2015. During that time the students were asked to use *Second Life* in order to practice their language skills in their own time. Since the study participants had no previous experience in using virtual worlds, including *Second Life*, they were instructed in the use of it during an orientation session held at the beginning of the semester. It was conducted during a class and lasted ca. 90 minutes. Among other things, the students were shown how to create an account, customize and control an avatar, teleport to various destinations in the said world and how to communicate with other residents of *Second Life*. It should also be noted that the participants were cautioned about potential dangers of this type of environment during this orientation session.

The data collection instruments used in the study included a background and an evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix). The former tool encompassed items relating to demographic information needed for the description of the study participants. The latter instrument consisted of six open-ended questions aimed at eliciting the respondents' views on the use of *Second Life* for learning and teaching English there. The students were asked to enumerate benefits and drawbacks of *Second Life* in learning English (the first two questions),

¹ It should be noted that this sample was of being convenience since the students were available to the researcher at that time and willing to volunteer (Dörnyei 2007: 98-99).

point to and explain its usefulness and/or ineffectiveness in learning various language skills and subsystems (question 3). What is more, the study participants were requested to describe the said world's positive or negative impact on other areas of language learning (question 4). The last two questions asked the students to point out the target language skills and subsystems (question 5) and other language elements (question 6) they would like to develop among their students as future language teachers by means of virtual worlds. It has to be noted that both questions required the study participants to briefly justify their answers. Finally, the two data collection tools were filled out anonymously by the students in English during class time.

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Generally, the quantitative analysis encompassed counting the number of the participants' responses and calculating means and percentages. As for the qualitative analysis, it involved the students' responses to the open-ended questions. The answers to the open-ended items were first transcribed on a computer word processor program and carefully read and reread in order to look for frequently occurring information. The researcher used the highlighting and comment functions of the word processor program which allowed him to highlight parts of the text with different colors and insert comments to record any observations recognized in the data, respectively.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. The usefulness of *Second Life* for learning English as a foreign language

The analysis of the data revealed that the study participants regarded *Second Life* as a tool for communication (mostly based on text) with (native) speakers (9 respondents out of 15) and as a source of the target language vocabulary and phrases (7 participants). The same number of students found *Second Life* as a great opportunity to check their linguistic knowledge and as a means of seeing interesting places (5 answers). What is more, individual students valued the world in question for its stress-free learning conditions, ways of overcoming language barriers in communication and opportunities for taking part in professional foreign language courses. The following excerpts illustrate some of these points²:

- *You can practice English by way of talking with foreigners.*

² The participants' comments are given with original grammar and spelling retained, with no researcher's intervention.

- *We can meet a lot of people representing different levels of proficiency and thus we can check our knowledge.*
- *We become acquainted with various people there and experience new cultures and traditions.*
- *I can learn new words by reading different instructions and pieces of information.*

Despite the above-mentioned advantages of using *Second Life* for learning English, the study participants also pointed out at some drawbacks related to using it for that purpose. Some students did not like the fact that the users of *Second Life* (e.g. non-native English speakers) made a lot of mistakes during conversations (6 respondents), they had difficulties in finding a willing and properly proficient person to talk to and complained about the rudeness or impoliteness of some of the residents of this virtual world (for both items, 5 participants). In addition to this, four students observed that the language produced by *Second Life* users contained a lot of short forms, abbreviations and slang words that are difficult to understand. Finally, individual students experienced technical problems and needed more time to familiarize themselves with the said world. The following extracts provide examples of these types of comments:

- *We may learn incorrect grammatical constructions if we talk with a person who doesn't know much about English grammar.*
- *Sometimes it's difficult to come across somebody who speaks English at the same level of language advancement.*
- *It is possible to meet a lot of rude and intolerant people and people who often make immoral proposals.*
- *People there use a lot of abbreviations, dialects, etc. which are difficult to understand for some other users.*

Figure 1 demonstrates the study participants' perceptions of using *Second Life* for developing language skills and subsystems. The students considered the world in question to be the most helpful in becoming skilled at writing (12 out of 15) and reading skills (6) as well as in learning the target language vocabulary (8). On the other hand, the students did not regard *Second Life* to be particularly useful in practicing speaking or grammar (7 each), listening and pronunciation (4 each).

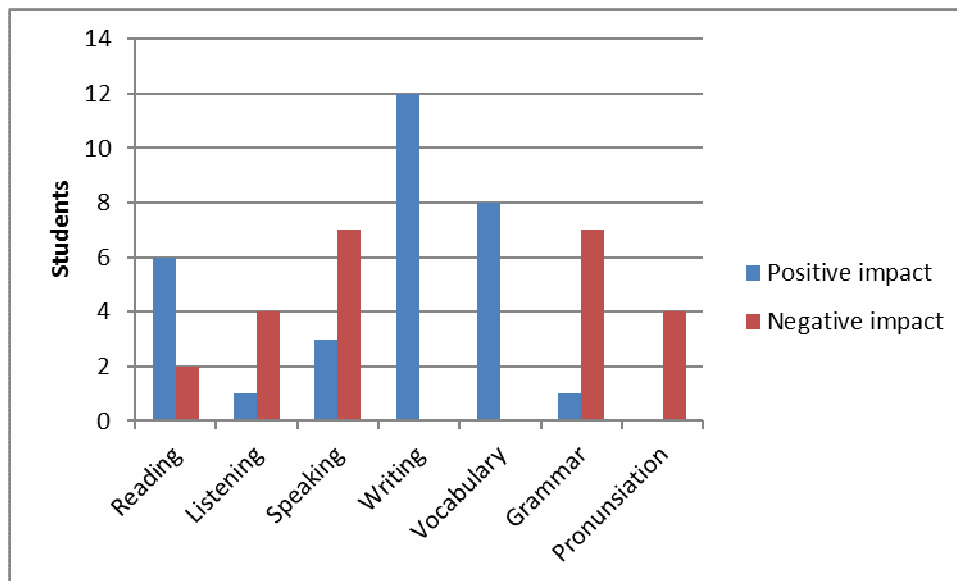


Figure 1. Positive and negative impact of using *Second Life* on the development of language skills and subsystems according to the study participants

When asked to justify their answers, the students said that they typically used this virtual world in order to communicate in English with the residents of *Second Life* by means of text (i.e. they used the chat function). This is why, according to the participants, they could develop writing skills or master English vocabulary. What is more, some of the study participants also observed that online users generally did not care about grammar, made a lot of language mistakes and used very simple language forms. Such situations gave the students fewer opportunities to work, for example, on the development of speaking skills, pronunciation and grammar. Some of these issues are visible in the following extracts:

- *My visits to this virtual world were only based on text messages and because of this this skill was mainly developed. I think we can develop our vocabulary and learn new expressions.*
- *I learnt a lot of new words. Reading and grammar were not very useful there because Internet users tend to simplify grammar and make a lot of mistakes.*
- *I conducted text-based conversations and this is why I didn't practice speaking and listening skills.*
- *I did not practice oral communication so I was not able to develop my pronunciation.*

Finally, the analysis of the gathered data showed that the students' visits to *Second Life* made them more motivated and confident of using the target language in communication.

In addition to this, the visits there made them more willing to learn about other cultures and languages. The following excerpts exemplify these opinions:

- *Not only the language but also my attitude towards learning it, my motivation and self-confidence.*
- *The visits to Second Life had a very positive impact on my desire to learn about other cultures and other foreign languages I haven't known before.*
- *Second Life helps to open up and express your own opinions and ideas. In the real world people are often too shy to do it. Second Life allows you to plan your conversations. This is difficult to do in the real world.*

3.3.2. The potential of *Second Life* for teaching English as a foreign language

Figure 2 shows the participants' answers to questions 5 and 6 regarding the development of language skills and subsystems they would like to develop among their students by means of virtual worlds as future language teachers. As can be seen in the figure, they mostly indicated writing and speaking as well as vocabulary (8 each). Conversely, the development of the target language pronunciation, grammar and reading skills were mentioned by 2, 5 and 5 students respectively.

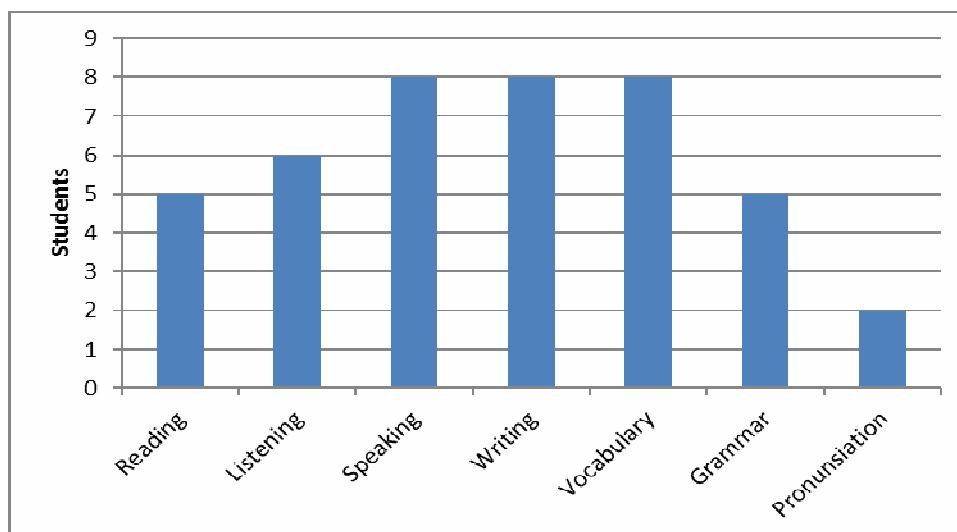


Figure 2. The participants' selection of language areas to be developed among their future students by means of virtual worlds

In addition, the analysis of the data revealed that the students decided on the said areas of the target language based on their own experiences in this world and their own experiences as language learners. Such opinions can be seen from the following extracts:

- *I think it's reading and writing. This is because from my own experience there is a lot of opportunities for developing these skills.*
- *I would like to develop listening skills because "virtual methods" are more interesting for language learners. This is because they are particularly bored with listening different text in lessons.*
- *I'd like to develop listening, speaking and writing skills. For students the use of Second Life may be the only chance to speak with native speakers of English.*
- *I think I'd like to develop listening, speaking and writing skills among my students through virtual worlds. Thanks to the chat function in Second Life there is a possibility to practice these language skills. Second Life is interesting and also it may help in the development of a foreign language since it is a stress-free way of learning a language. A person visiting Second Life is not overwhelmed and is not afraid of making mistakes. What's more, there aren't teachers who can help students what to say and thus students have to try to explain things and speak in a foreign language on their own.*

As far as the development of other language elements among the participants' future students is concerned, the prospective teachers quite frequently mentioned English culture and customs. In addition, they repeatedly indicated the development of conversational skills. This is because they regarded *Second Life* as a stress-free speaking environment and they considered communication as an inseparable part of this virtual world. This is evident in the following comments:

- *It's finding out about new cultures and traditions in order to develop the general knowledge about English.*
- *I would like to develop the skill of communication because speaking is typical of this virtual world. What's more, the use of this world gives the opportunity to speak in English with no stress. Here nobody laughs at anybody and corrects mistakes. In this way the desire to learn more is promoted. Thanks to Second Life English may become not only a school subject and a source of good grades but also a tool for communication with different people.*

When it comes to language tasks the participants of the study – would-be language teachers – would like to create for their students to be performed in virtual worlds (e.g. *Second Life*), the students were quite diverse in their ideas. Their responses ranged from the active use of the English language to the passive reception of it in a variety of situations. For example:

- *Find three avatars and ask each two questions.*
- *Older and more advanced students can: (1) spend a week in Second Life and make friends with a lot of avatars; find out about their interests and hobbies, habits, etc., (2) take some screenshots of their interlocutors (avatars), (3) talk about their experiences in the classroom or share their experiences with their classmates.*
- *Students are asked to visit a variety of places relating to the target language culture (e.g. museums, art galleries, exhibitions, churches, famous buildings, places).*
- *I would like my students to move around this world and perform various actions: they could do shopping in different shops, go to different schools and even work there. These could help them learn new words and they could communicate in English.*
- *As a teacher I would like to organize a “shared visit” to Second Life and ask my students to explore this world together and communicate at the same time.*

4. Discussion

The outcomes of the study demonstrated that the participants perceived the use of *Second Life* for learning the English language to be beneficial, specifically in the area of communication and vocabulary. In addition, they found it useful while developing writing skills and learning new target language words and phrases. These findings could be explained by the fact that the students mainly resorted to the use of the chat function available in the world and conducted text-based conversations with other *Second Life* users. In this way they could practice writing and use appropriate vocabulary in order to convey their thoughts and ideas with their interlocutors.

The study participants' language experience in the virtual world made them also aware of its negative sides. For example, the students complained about the inaccurate use of English by some *Second Life* users, difficulties in finding a person/avatar to converse with and rude and improper behaviors of some residents of the world. They also did not consider *Second Life* as particularly helpful in the development of speaking skills or grammar. When it comes to the first set of problems, they are part and parcel of online communication, and so

they are also characteristic of virtual worlds. For example, inappropriate behavior or grieving have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Topol, 2013). As for the finding related to the ineffectiveness of practicing speaking by means of voice, it could be argued that the participants of the study got used to online communication through text rather than voice before the use of *Second Life* and they simply transferred these skills or habits to this virtual environment. Another explanation for the issue in question may be linked with the problem of meeting specific requirements (e.g., system, hardware, Internet speed) to be able to successfully participate orally in this virtual world.

The results of the study showed that the participants opted for the use of *Second Life* for developing speaking and writing skills as well as expanding target language vocabulary of students in their future teaching practices. This is because the participants were able to practice these language areas themselves while being there and see opportunities this particular virtual world offers for these language proficiency areas. In addition to this, they considered *Second Life* as a stress-free speaking environment. It should be noted that a less stressful and/or a low-stress atmosphere in virtual worlds is also reported in other studies (cf. Grant, Huand & Pasfield-Neofitou, 2013; Peterson, 2011). It is also interesting to observe that the participants of the present study reported willingness to use *Second Life* in order to teach their future students about the English culture and traditions. While there might be many reasons for such a state of affairs, one plausible explanation could lie in the fact the participants encountered people from different cultures there, talked about traditions, saw various places, went to museums, exhibitions, etc. In addition, students' perceptions of what constitutes effective foreign language pedagogy are visible in a selection of their proposals of language activities to be performed in virtual worlds and presented at the end of the Results section. Such proposals are based on the participants' visits to *Second Life*, their own perceptions of the world and language experiences there.

5. Conclusion

The study is not immune from weaknesses. One of the limitations is related to the fact that it included a small number of participants and consisted of female students only, which reduces the validity of generalizing the findings. Another weakness relates to the way of collecting data which was mainly performed by means of a questionnaire. It relied on students self-reporting their learning in this type of environment. As a result, the adequacy of the participants' accounts of their actions there may be questioned. Such limitations demonstrate that further research is needed in this area. Future research projects into the use of virtual

worlds for learning and teaching a foreign/second language should encompass larger groups of students consisting of both female and male students (possibly of other foreign languages) and draw upon other data collection instruments (e.g., interviews with participants, students' logs).

Finally, the study findings show that virtual worlds such as *Second Life* can become useful vehicles for English language learning and teaching. This is because the interactions with the world in question and its users as well as their positive perceptions of this virtual world can be interpreted as offering, for example, opportunities for authentic communication in a foreign language or the development of other language skills and subsystems. It is also important to note that letting prospective language teachers access virtual worlds and see for themselves what they offer may foster their better understanding of these virtual environments and prepare them for the use of virtual worlds in their future teaching endeavors.

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Appendix

Background questionnaire

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you studied English?
3. How would you rate your level of English proficiency? (*Please check the level that applies to you.*)
 - low intermediate
 - intermediate
 - upper intermediate
 - pre-advanced
 - advanced
 - very advanced
4. Do you use digital technology for language study?
 - Yes No
 - If yes, provide details.
5. Have you ever used a virtual world (e.g. *Second Life*) for learning/practicing English?
 - Yes No
 - If yes, provide details.

Evaluation questionnaire

1. Please list at least two advantages of using *Second Life* for learning English.
2. Please list at least two disadvantages of using *Second Life* for learning English.
3. *Second Life* was the most/least useful in developing the following English skills and subsystems:

	the most useful	the least useful
reading		
listening		
speaking		
writing		
grammar		
vocabulary		
pronunciation		

Explain why?

4. Please describe *Second Life*'s positive and/or negative impact on other areas of language learning.
5. What language skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing) would you like to develop among your students by means of virtual worlds as a future language teacher? Please explain.
6. What language subsystems (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) would you like to develop among your students by means of virtual worlds as a future language teacher? Please explain.