USING THE SECOND LIFE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT
FOR FL EDUCATION: A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to raise awareness related to the postmodern educational philosophies, and to the opportunities provided by the emerging technologies and conditions of our era with regard to foreign language (FL) education. The main discussion was that educators and educational practices are not in complete harmony with the recent products of technology or with the needs, interests, and habits of the learners.

The current work proposed Second Life (SL) as a useful model to focus on and investigate in order to derive some theoretical and practical guidelines and conclusions that will be consistent with all philosophies, applications, stakeholders, instruments, and conditions in educational settings in the current age of technology and in the future.

The present study concluded that the administrative side of education has fallen far behind the progress in technology, and thus remains quite traditional and static, which creates a paradoxical situation suggesting that the teaching part has lost its power and efficiency, while the learning part continues to be innovative and creative.

Key words: Second Life; foreign language education; educational technologies; educational philosophies; postmodernism.

1. Introduction

Like many other fields in social sciences, education deals with highly qualitative and incalculable variables that urge us to refrain from stereotyping and generalizing. Therefore, the main mission of education should be guiding and helping people to be good learners by showing them effective ways and sources rather than pushing them to memorize, or automatizing them with homework or some predetermined methodologies and formulas. However, although sustainable examples of good practices in education have been proposed, the majority of work has followed the positivistic nature of the physical sciences, with a tradition to create fixed approaches and frameworks that were postulated to be applicable or used for everyone. This tendency should be open to discussion and criticism in the field of education, especially today when conditions for individualized and differentiated education are available more than ever before.

2. Background

2.1. Why does philosophy matter in education?

Philosophy, just like the foundation of a house, is the most basic and vital component- the backbone of anything, and therefore, the most essential and irreplaceable part of education (Uzun, 2015, pp. 14-15). All of the methodologies, approaches, techniques, teacher and student roles, the materials and procedures to be used, etc. are regulated by the philosophy at hand. If a country can be ruled peacefully without a constitution, or if judges can perform their tasks harmoniously without needing or holding to their book of law, then educators may do their jobs without philosophy. What would happen without a stable philosophy in education is quite similar to what would happen in a country or legal system without a constitution. Unfortunately, although the matter is that serious, the philosophy subject in education is often ignored or neglected (Uzun, 2012). Educators concentrate on the automatic applications on the surface without thinking of the basics that underlie these applications. This is most often the reason behind ineffective and unsustainable applications and decisions in education. The fact is that it is very easy to forget about the ultimate goal(s) and to stick just to the means that have been designed for the sake of the main goal(s) for longer than needed. The problem can be explained and exemplified by the help of the modern vs. postmodern distinction in the literature.

2.2. Why does philosophy matter in education?

Modernism and postmodernism have been hot discussion topics, particularly for the last thirty years. Although there is not a single and well-structured definition of these concepts, they have been compared and discussed within the evolution of mankind in history as well as the developments in the social and scientific aspects, and the tendencies and habits related to these aspects (see Uzun, 2015, pp. 26-33). When investigated from the educational point of view, it would be possible to describe at least the main differences as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Modern vs. postmodern education

Modern Education	Postmodern Education
Teaching-oriented	Learning-oriented
Mostly authoritative	Contributory and participatory
Fixed time, place, method	Anytime, anywhere, anyhow
Fixed materials and topics	Modular, modifiable, flexible materials and topics
Mass education	Individualized, differentiated education
Pen and paper	Digitalized
Physical environments	Online, blended
Local	Global

2.3. Educational technologies in the postmodern era

The noticeable progress in technology has enhanced educational technologies as well. Although it has been discussed that the innovations in the field of education have been outperformed by the improvements in other fields, this might be caused by the static habits and tendencies of the educational stakeholders rather than by the very technology.

Likewise, it would be possible to suggest that technology-based tools and materials are more than enough for the time being. However, they remain unexploited and therefore underdeveloped. There are thousands of websites and weblogs as well as hundreds of software programs and platforms that have not been intended for education, but which can be used for educational purposes with slight modifications. The fact is that the supply and demand relationship works not only for commerce but for any field.

One of the mentioned platforms that has not been initially intended and developed for education is Second Life (see Fig. 1). The SL three-dimensional 3D digital environment has been selected not only because it has been very popular recently, with over 1 million active users, but also because it has been used successfully with different purposes by a very serious number of educational institutions around the world. As a matter of fact, it stands to be a most flexible and versatile place with promises specifically for education, as it enables users to do everything and many more in the SL virtual world than can be done in traditional educational environments.

Figure 1. The SL platform

Moreover, the scientific literature on SL which is growing rapidly (e.g. Blasing, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Wehner et al., 2011; Jauregi et al., 2011; Wang and Vasques, 2012; Wang and Shao, 2012; Lan et al., 2013; Aydin, 2013; Berns et al., 2013; Wigham and Chanier, 2015; Garrido-Iñigo and Rodriguez-Moreno, 2015, etc.), proposes that when evaluated from the supply-demand theory, it seems that SL will enormously improve in the future. It is also possible that other platforms similar to SL may come out soon. The SL virtual environment allows us to carry out all of our educational practices, organize meetings and conferences, communicate synchronously as well as create collaboratively.

Explaining that virtual worlds are a type of reality in which students can meet and communicate with other learners in the target language, Kruk (2014) investigated the effectiveness of using online activities and a browser-based virtual world in teaching the second conditional in English. The results revealed positive effects on teaching and learning grammar. In another study, Jarmon et al. (2009) explored the nature and process of learning in SL in a graduate interdisciplinary communication course. They concluded that the SL learning environment was effectively used with the project-based approach to foster experiential development of interdisciplinary communication awareness and strategies. Similarly, Diehl and Prins (2008) argued that SL users participate in an activity system, engaging in myriad activities (e.g. language classes) which provide structured environments

that generate both intended and unintended outcomes. Their findings revealed that in many ways participation in SL enhanced participants' intercultural literacy – for example, by fostering use of multiple languages, cross-cultural encounters and friendships, greater awareness of insider cultural perspectives, and openness towards new viewpoints.

Additionally, Edirisingha et al. (2009) examined the pedagogical potential of SL related to socialisation and learning. They reported that the learning activities designed for SL, the artefacts and the 3-D immersive environment provided exploratory learning experience for the participants, and SL constituted an environment where the 'socialisation' stage occurred smoothly. Likewise, Wang et al. (2011) investigated student teachers' experience of teaching English in an experimental EFL program in SL, observing student teachers' overall positive perceptions of SL as an EFL learning platform. They concluded as follows:

> … the student teachers took a lot from this opportunity and felt confident about its future potential. Second Life is clearly a platform with much to offer to EFL/ ESL instruction. With the addition of technology support, clearly defined objectives and curriculum, and supporting resources such as blogs and lesson plans, SL is poised to become a great supplement to EFL learning and instruction. In the exact words of one teacher, "I see so much potential, it's so exciting." (p. 37)

Notwithstanding the potential, barriers may always arise when new and unusual things are to be employed. Warburton (2009) maintains that the complexity of immersive environments spans a range of technical and social intricacies, and presents a particular set of problems to educators and developers seeking to situate educational activities in a virtual space. However, the positive contributions of SL seem to be too serious and important to ignore or neglect. Evaluating their case study, Wang and Braman (2009) advocated that the implementation of SL results in improved learning experience as well as higher learning motivation and better performance. White and Le Cornu (2010) claimed that teachers wishing to take advantage of virtual worlds should approach them as an 'other' cultural space as well as a platform with given technical functionality, which will create an opportunity for experiential learning, or learning by doing, to take place. Furthermore, Iqbal et al. (2010) maintained that digital and online technology means could create solutions to help out the illiterate adults by bridging the gap between technology-based solutions and traditional learning theories through the use of virtual environments such as SL.

Therefore, we should confidently suggest that online and distance education in virtual environments has the potential to cover both the emotional and intellectual aspects of learning and teaching, despite the difficulties and incompatibility between the ideal educational philosophies and the common philosophy in the minds of the current generation.

3. Postmodern foreign language education in Second Life

3.1. Introductory remarks

According to Özen Baykent (2015), throughout their lives people acquire certain knowledge, skills and competence that they are not born with. Regarding the principles of the postmodern educational philosophies and the educational technologies that we have today, it would be possible to criticize the current traditional approaches to FL education, particularly in such countries as Turkey, which create people who know all of the grammatical rules of the FL (English in our case, but also other languages), but can hardly use it orally or in writing. When people in Turkey complain that they or their children have been learning English for ages, but that unlike their counterparts in many European countries they cannot speak or write, the responses coming from FL teachers tend to be that the Europeans have the opportunities to travel and practise what they learn in the classrooms, which might be a correct postulation, but if the problem in the Turkish educational system was that simple, it would be very easy to solve. Nevertheless, the problem seems to be deeply rooted in the educational philosophy of the country, which seems to be lacking in the teacher training programs in the faculties of education throughout the universities, and also in the minds of the teachers.

How should or could FL education be changed in the postmodern era of technology then? Below, a model that can be applied by the help of SL and some other educational technologies will be proposed. First, we should know and decide about our needs. Second, we should be willing to change or modify our habits in order to adapt to the new and emerging conditions of the age. Last but not least, we should be ready to modify our roles as teachers and abandon some of our powers that we are strictly and tightly woven in such areas as controlling, assessing, and managing our students. This does not mean that we will not do these at all, but that we will do our tasks in the style of an instructor and facilitator rather than in the authoritative manner of a teacher and punisher. This is possible when we realize that teachers exist for learners, and that learners are not there to satisfy their egos. We should comprehend and accept that we have already lost our dominance and power as teaching

bodies after the invention of the Internet and the improvements in all communication and dissemination software and hardware.

Education needs to be learner-centred and free of fixed and authoritative approaches as well as of strict timetables and place arrangements; it should be available to learners whenever they need it and in the most suitable form for each individual; and it should be modifiable and flexible in content and procedures. All of these prerequisites of the probable postmodern FL education might be met once the schools are transformed into a form resembling an online international conference where the environments are thematically organized and presented simultaneously in multiple ways that allow people to choose out of a variety of options supplied in the best suitable time and by the person(s) preferred for them. In other words, we need an online environment, which will be 24/7 active and well organized in terms of FL proficiency level, topics, activities, etc., so that it will meet not only the schedules but also the interests, needs, and intelligence types of as many individuals as possible. Certainly, it would be impossible to claim that an educational environment such as the one explained will solve every problem, but it will be as useful as the Internet is for each person in the world.

Figure 2. SL images

3D digital environments such as the one in Figure 2 (images captured in SL) create opportunities for people to navigate through different locations by teleporting with just one click. They are enabled to listen to a rich number of sources; to interact with many different types of people and materials both synchronously and asynchronously; to get assistance and provide help to others; to create and add their own language learning materials, strategies, suggestions, and so forth; and to learn and teach at the same time by being a learner and a teacher simultaneously. There is no authority; there is no gender, age, ethnicity, or any other kind of restriction or distinction. These environments are vivid and always active since there is no day and night on the Internet; there is always someone awake at different points of the world, which is really good for intercultural communication and globalization. Such environments also create opportunities to learn a FL from the native speakers of the language and to practise the language with them. That is to say, within SL a Turkish university student may participate in the classes of any respected university in the world, for example, communicating with university students from every part of the world, or talking to some famous professors whose books they have been reading but whom they have never had the chance to meet or speak to.

The two important things to consider and improve in this process of tech-schooling are the educational philosophies that need to be basically different from the modern philosophies, and the virtual reality environments such as SL that will provide the opportunities to practise the basic language skills and enable the activities that people do in classrooms. All other related issues such as adaptation of traditional habits, modification of the teacher and student roles, arrangement of testing and evaluation, development of FL software and hardware, etc. will follow just as e-commerce followed the trends of demand, which contributed a lot to the global economy. A similar model of e-schooling holds huge potential in this sense. Indeed, the present study is a preliminary philosophical and theoretical work to what has been realised successfully in local FL education settings and will be expanded internationally.

3.2. The learning setting

Based on the philosophical perspective discussed hereby, a scientific research project has been carried out at Uludag University with the cooperation of a state secondary school of the Ministry of National Education in Turkey to explore to what degree the SL virtual environment would allow to realise the theoretical hypotheses that underlie the idea of postmodern FL education.

The virtual campus of the Faculty of Education (see Figure 3) has been constructed and furnished with the necessary materials to provide the 3D version of the subjects included in the coursebook of the students and to support them with the most interesting, exciting, and realistic environment possible. The topics of all 10 units of the coursebook were covered in the different parts of the virtual campus, and were practised with the help of carefully constructed activities in the designated places. In addition to the researcher and 3 external experts, 13 third-year university students (teacher trainees) and 40 secondary school students (6th grade) took part in the experiment. Each university student was made responsible for one of the 10 units/topics and located in the relevant place during the activity hours, which were made available to everyone in the schedule posted in the announcement timetable. The university students were asked to prepare their activities in line with the curriculum of the secondary school students, and to apply these during the predetermined activity hours. The whole process was realised under the supervision of the researcher.

Figure 3. The virtual campus of the Faculty of Education

The university students and the secondary school students did not know one another, and had not had any kind of contact before the experiment. As it is often criticised by the students that speaking to their classmates and teacher in L2 is not realistic in L1 settings, the project aimed at overcoming this issue by appointing different roles to play (i.e. a football player from Argentina, an Italian artist, a Swedish musician, an actress from the USA, etc.) to ten university students who acted as teachers in the digital campus. Thus, although everyone in the area was Turkish, virtually they pretended to be foreigners; and speaking in Turkish was prohibited on the campus, particularly for the university students. The remaining three university students acted as Turkish teachers of English as in the school of the secondary school students.

Each secondary school student was given a username and password with which they could log in to the digital campus and join the activities. They could also freely wander around and use all the language learning materials (i.e. vocabulary boards, grammar exercise boards, videos, reading texts, etc.) individually. The activities were 30 minutes each, and were repeated twice a week in the predetermined schedule. There were 10 different structured activities that were in line with the curriculum and the course book of the learners. They could communicate with the people in the campus both in written and spoken ways. The digital area was open 24/7 although the activities were carried out during the certain times. Therefore, the participants had plenty of free time to be involved in free activities and communication.

Fundamentally, everyone was a learner although the perspectives, aspects, and roles varied. The task of the teacher trainees was to learn how to teach online by creating and organising their activities as well as applying them smoothly, pretending to be a foreigner at the same time. On the other hand, the task of the secondary school students was to explore and enjoy the environment while completing the specific tasks given as homework by their teacher at school (1 task per week, over the period of 4 weeks) through attending the activities and communicating with the people in the virtual environment. The homework of the students required them to complete a series of tasks that consisted of talking with others or exploring the materials installed in the campus, and recording the information on specific templates to submit to their teachers at school.

3.3. Results and discussion

All of the logs and written communication data were recorded and saved. The recorded observations proved that the SL virtual environment holds an important potential for education, and especially for foreign language learning due to its multicultural character. The

learners preferred to contact the avatars that had foreign names rather than the avatars with Turkish names. This suggested that L2 communication in SL would be more realistic than it is in the local classroom settings. The learners tended to try to speak and know the people they did not know; and to use more English with the avatars that they thought were from other countries. The only moment they contacted the avatars that acted as Turkish teachers of English was when they needed some clarification related to the tasks they were trying to complete, or when they could not understand what an avatar said to them. They never attempted to create or initiate a genuine or authentic conversation with the three Turkish teachers. However, very interesting and long conversations were recorded between the learners and the Argentinian footballer, the American actress, and the Swedish musician as well as others.

Similarly, the observations with regard to the teacher trainees showed that people are more curious about the strangers. In the beginning, they wanted to know who their fellows were and exchanged information eagerly, reporting that getting to know new people is exciting. However, when they knew one another, and when everything was clear, the communication rate decreased. Additionally, they reported that at the very first stages of the project they did not have any idea about how they could teach or learn something in a virtual place like SL. Nevertheless, in time it became very clear and quite easy to adapt to the environment and its conditions. They stated that they could perform their profession through distance education once they were provided with the necessary environment and conditions; the rest could be found on the Internet.

It is claimed that the current study was based on the principles of postmodern education not only because it considered and reflected the principles proposed in Table 1 but also because although the project activities were based on topics covered in the national curriculum and the textbook used, the procedures and contents were flexibly developed and modified by the users according to their needs and wishes. The-four-A ideal of education was applied, that is, the 'anytime, anywhere, anyone, anything' learning, which takes education out of fixed time and place or other traditional approaches.

4. Conclusion

The future is now, that is to say, the future has already arrived. It can be very closely associated with technology, and the improvements in technology, especially in the last two decades which are remarkable. However, it seems that the administrative side of education has fallen far behind the progress in technology, and thus remains quite traditional and static

This creates a paradoxical situation suggesting that the teaching part has lost its power and efficiency but the learning part continues to be innovative and creative. The educational systems in different countries are shaped by the governments, a fact which directs us to the relation between education and politics (Özen Baykent, 2016). Therefore, the governments need to take the leading role and encourage blended and/or flipped education more often. Only then may the real postmodern philosophies and related applications be actually put into practice. Moreover, teachers and scholars who work in the field of education need to be awake to the changes in the history of mankind if they are to continue to be the aspirants for leading societies with their knowledge and experiences. Otherwise, it is very probable that what happened to postmen may happen to them.

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