

A Review of Research on the Effects of Second Life on Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract: Recent studies suggest that Second Life (SL) is a useful tool for educational purposes, specifically for the language learning. However, few studies provide data regarding the effect of SL on speaking anxiety of English as foreign language (EFL) learners. Thus, this paper aims at reviewing the studies on the role of SL as a language learning tool on EFL learners' speaking anxiety levels. In this sense, a certain number of studies on SL as an educational and as a language learning tool were reviewed in the light of anxiety levels of the EFL learners. The studies revealed that SL is a pragmatic tool for language learning activities of EFL learners. Moreover, it was concluded that SL as a language practice environment reduces learners' anxiety levels. However, the studies conducted so far indicate that there has been a lack of empirical data on the effect of SL on the EFL learners' speaking anxiety, especially in Turkish EFL learning context.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; speaking anxiety; Second Life

Second Life'in Konuşma Kaygısına Etkileri Üzerine Bir Alanyazın Taraması

Öz: Yapılan çalışmalar Second Life adlı çevrimiçi sosyal ortamın özellikle dil öğrenimi olmak üzere eğitime yönelik amaçlar doğrultusunda faydalı bir araç olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ancak Second Life'in İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin taşıdıkları konuşma kaygısı üzerindeki etkisi hususunda az sayıda çalışma bulunmaktadır. Bu nedenle, mevcut çalışma Second Life'in yabancı dil öğrenen öğrencilerin konuşma kaygı düzeyleri üzerinde yapılmış çalışmalarını gözden geçirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Second Life'i dil öğreniminde kullanılan bir araç olarak inceleyen çalışmalar, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenler arasında kaygı konusu dikkate alınarak incelenmiştir. Çalışmaların sonuçları, Second Life'in İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin dil öğrenme etkinlikleri için faydalı bir araç olduğunu göstermektedir. Ek olarak, çalışmalar, dil öğrenmede Second Life kullanımının öğrencilerde kaygı düzeyini düşürdüğünü de göstermektedir. Buna karşın, günümüze kadar yapılmış çalışmaların temel sınırlılığı, özellikle ülkemizde yabancı dil öğrenme bağlamında Second Life kullanımının yabancı dil kaygısı üzerindeki etkileri açısından deneysel ve betimsel veri sağlamaması olarak vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı bir dil olarak İngilizce; konuşma kaygısı; Second Life

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Introduction

Speaking is a vital component of the social interactions that take place on a regular basis. In order to interact, one is required to establish a healthy communication by sending and receiving messages. Therefore, social human life is about establishing an understanding based on vocal messages. Moreover, speaking is regarded as one of the most important functions languages have, and has an essential place in language learners' lives both individually and socially, directly affecting success and failure (Kurudayıoğlu, 2011). In terms of speaking, EFL learners may confront various difficulties and problems during the production phase. Since speaking requires social skills as well as individual learning strategies, it might be challenging for learners to reach proficiency without facing serious obstacles. According to Shumin (2002), these obstacles in the way of speaking can be generated by affective factors that refer to the emotional side of a human being, which is directly related to feelings, behaviors and, most importantly, emotions. When affective states of the learners are at hand, it is possible to include factors such as anxiety, self-esteem, inhibition and risk-taking. As Brown (1994) suggests, among the affective states, anxiety is the most important issue to be taken into account in terms of speaking. In other words, language learners mostly complain about hardships of speaking in public and about the factors such as worry, errors, forgetfulness, communication apprehension and absenteeism (Aydın, 2008a, 2008b; Young, 1991).

In addition to affective states, language learning environment plays an important role in EFL learning. It is clear that human interactions seem to generate relatively more anxiety than do interactions from a distance. Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that the desire to make a positive social impression on others is one of the outcomes of speaking anxiety and learning environment relationship. Taking this into account, one can claim that the dynamic relationship with society puts a constantly-growing pressure, therefore a speaking-related anxiety, on EFL learners' shoulders. However, reducing the intensive physical endeavors of communication that social interaction requires, and using types of interactions that provide more personal space greatly reduce the speaking anxiety (Couto, 2010; Johnson, 2006). In order to preserve the lower anxiety in speaking, various dimensions are provided for the speaking environment of EFL learners. One of the assumptions suggests that giving learners opportunities in order to allow them to feel that they are connected to the language learning context plays an important role in terms of reducing and/or maintaining the anxiety level (Warburton, 2009). On the other hand, language learners may perform better if they are to confront speaking environments which evoke the feeling that there is not an obvious assessment at hand (Horwitz, 2001). Another opinion is that speaking anxiety may be reduced by removing students from the physical environments of the classrooms and providing them with online opportunities such as blogs, podcasts and video chats. However, the most striking platforms for the speaking practice of EFL learners are known to be the virtual environments. Among these virtual environments, SL is one of the most popular one which has been widely studied by educators for the sake of language learning (Johnson, 2006).

The discussion about the desirable environments for language learning where the learners are able to lower their barriers of anxiety towards language performance such as speaking turns the direction into the necessity of a comparison between traditional learning environments and virtual ones. It is widely known that traditional classrooms may be teacher-centered and passive both physically and mentally. However, it is suggested that the role of foreign language teachers has turned its direction from a traditional teaching to being facilitators, and accordingly the crucial role in a language learning environment belongs to learners rather than teachers. In the light of this view, virtual language learning environments may be considered as much more useful platforms in terms of efficiency since they provide positive outcomes such as learner autonomy, responsibility and creativity (Johnson, 2006). It is also known that Vygotskian (1978) constructivism approach supports the idea that learning takes place with the help of social environment of learners. As an extension of this assumption, it is possible to state that virtual environments bare the resemblance to the social interactions of life since their design carries the motive that they must be similar to real-world environments. Moreover, virtual environments provide learners with a rehearsal opportunity for the real life. Balcikanli (2012) and Couto (2010) note that virtual environments may serve as useful tools for language learning activities with its considerable potential for lowering the stressful environment. In addition, due to their nature that is closely linked with computers and games which are attractive for many, unlike the traditional ones, virtual environments may automatically help learners tear down the barriers.

As an example of virtual learning environment, SL is a virtual world which was created and developed by Linden Labs in 2003 (<http://www.secondlife.com>). SL provides a three dimensional environment which enables users to explore and experience life-like situations such as travelling, discovering, sight-seeing and having conversation as well as online text-based chat and sharing multimedia files. Users can experience many things that are practically the same as the real life. Moreover, users are not required to share their identities with public. Users may create and build environments at which they can feel relaxed and comfortable. In addition, SL gives users an opportunity to alter their voices and hide behind their avatars without being detected or exposed. SL can offer users the experience of alternate reality in which they can meet their friends, explore new items, and express themselves in limitless ways such as using various, self-designed avatars, clothes and items. In SL, users can chat by using their actual voice, witness actual conversations between people. In addition to its common use, it is proposed that SL is one of the most well-known virtual worlds that are used for educational purposes by educators (Aydın, 2013a; Inman et al., 2010)

Recently, SL has been widely used in the educational context, especially in language learning, by many educators, because it is suggested that SL provides a great opportunity for language learning with a low-risk environment (Johnson, 2006). Real life human interactions may cause stress and anxiety for the participant, so the convenience of being

able to sit behind the screen gives feeling of freedom to the learners. SL has qualities that might help language learners to be more courageous (Couto, 2010). One of the most appealing features of SL is that there is evidently less authority, which gives the control to the students themselves. In other words, the more engaging the classroom environment is, the better the learning will take place. Students' motivation increases if the learning environment provides engaging activities (Warburton, 2009:421). With its low-risk, anonymity and engaging environments, SL provides students with relaxed and enjoyable speaking opportunities. In this virtual world, students who want to improve their speaking abilities can participate in various classes and speak with native speakers of other languages without even moving away from their chairs or getting out of their rooms. SL which manifests itself as a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) system can also ensure that users are able to stay hidden and anonymous. Psychologically speaking, being anonymous provides the learners with an anxiety-free environment for speaking (Couto, 2010). However, the most prominent requirement is to provide a theoretical framework which establishes a pedagogical basis for the implications of SL in language learning.

Theoretical Framework

Since SL is an environment on which a great number of users spend their time, it requires users to behave accordingly, and they are provided with a realistic social surrounding. Therefore, just as in real life, communicative dimension of a language plays an important role in SL learning environments (Johnson, 2006). In addition, the issue of *collaborative learning* draws great attention in regard to SL as a language learning platform. According to Vygotskian approach to learning, it is widely acknowledged that learning is mostly based on one's social environment and the social help from other people, which indicates the *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, SL provides learners with a solid social environment that supports collaborative learning. Moreover, social-based or collaborative learning ideas are supported by the constructivist learning theories of Piaget. According to Piaget (1955), learning and cognitive development proceeds by the learners' establishment of structures in mind. Since SL is considered as a life-like language learning environment as mentioned above, it is quite possible to say that constructivist theory can be supported by the virtual environment. According to Johnson (2006), students have the opportunity of working in groups to reach the communicative goals administered with cooperation, which underlines the importance of both collaborative and task-based language learning in a virtual environment. Considering the abovementioned theories that strengthen the feasibility of SL in language learning context, it is reasonable to examine the related studies on SL in order to comprehend its role as an language learning environment. Therefore, the following section presents a brief review of the related studies on SL used in educational and language learning environments.

Research on the Effects of Second Life on Speaking Anxiety

This section presents the studies conducted about the virtual environments such as SL and their use in educational –especially language learning environments. The related studies can be examined in three groups in the sense of the proximity which they bear towards this paper. It seems sensible to set the starting point with the studies which investigate the place of SL, and similar virtual environments. Subsequently, the studies which examine SL more specifically in educational context are brought into the light. Finally, the ones which deal with SL in language learning context in terms of its applicability, and are much more specific and focused conclude the section.

The consensus reached by a certain number of studies conducted on SL suggests that integration of new learning platforms into traditional learning is necessary. Considering the necessities to integrate educational activities with technological advancements, Bell (2009) suggested that the changing characteristics of learning environments require new platforms for learning. Thus, learning cultures have been constantly evolving in the direction of using three-dimensional virtual environments such as SL. In this perspective, it is possible to underline that learners develop a certain set of behaviors for themselves during their online activities in addition to their offline behaviors. In this sense, Macedo and Morgado (2009) discussed that developments in technology and computer operated systems have a great influence on the certain characteristics of self-improvement and learning. Therefore, in order to be qualified as functional, learners are required to acknowledge latest learning technologies and platforms such as virtual environments. Taking into consideration these requirements, virtual environments that are similar to SL are to be promoted as educational tools. Hence, SL and similar virtual environments have a great potential for educational purposes.

In addition to the constant development in technology, it is also possible to assert that the distribution of knowledge among learners has taken on different characteristics. For instance, Balcikanli (2012) stated that the ways of sharing knowledge have been altered with the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies. That is why, it is vital to understand how these changes in technology affect the characteristics of learning and teaching. In order to bring light to the possible relationship between Web 2.0 technologies and education, Balcikanli (2012) focused on SL and its use in language learning and speaking. After the data collection based on the observation of American and Turkish students' performances on SL, he concluded that the use of virtual environments such as SL reduces the risk of being threatened. As well as the studies which aim to identify the requirements of the new characteristics of education brought by technological advancements, the studies which attempt to investigate the role of computers and games in children's educational activities have come into existence. According to Alvarez (2006), it is widely known that children today spend a lot of time in front of their computers playing games, chatting and for many similar reasons. Therefore, they tend to ignore educational activities that require them to

pay attention and to be away from something they are quite attached to. Considering this, Alvarez (2006) stated that online activities including games and virtual environments can be taken as role models for educational activities in high schools and supplementary schools. The idea of merging online experiences with educational activities might serve as a quite intriguing tool for the learners to engage with learning. Alvarez (2006) administered a survey consisting questions related to the experiences of the teachers that were active members of the virtual platforms such as SL, Everquest II and Ragnarok. The study concluded that abovementioned virtual worlds can provide collective learning opportunities for the learners, which enables them to use different educational tools such as blackboards, textbooks and discussion groups in one platform which is online. As the use of virtual environments and games has been undoubtedly growing in number in the sense of education, Couto (2010) advised that the attention of educators must be drawn into the area. In this context, Couto (2010) attempted to determine whether there is a relationship between anxiety and the use of virtual worlds by evaluating the reactions of students who studied foreign languages after the speaking practice sessions on SL. The data collection was based on the students' language performances while practicing both face-to-face and in virtual environments. The results indicated that virtual worlds might have a potential of reducing anxiety in language performance. Yet the study lacked enough empirical data (Couto, 2010). Last, Warburton (2009) asserted that SL is the most well-known virtual platform which is used for educational purposes. Although SL provides a unique opportunity for learning, it has a few limitations for educators in terms of complex designing. In other words, it is acknowledged that educators might have difficulties with the complexities that the codes and designing process might put in the way.

A study conducted by Inman et al (2010) attempts to analyze the studies on SL as an educational tool by reviewing them in different categories in order to shed a light on the implications of SL in educational context. Inman et al (2010) were intrigued by the introduction of virtual environments such as SL as educational tool with the constant advancements in technology. Therefore, it is quite necessary to investigate the history of studies on virtual environments such as SL. The studies were divided into three groups as followed: qualitative, quantitative and mixed group. The data concluded that SL and similar virtual environments are quite promising in terms of educational purposes (Inman et al., 2010).

Aydin (2013) reviewed the studies on the potential of SL as an educational tool in language learning, and implied that although the preceding studies indicate that it might possess a great potential of language learning, the empirical data is not enough for a clear conclusion. He also noted that SL positively influences the affective states of the learners and promotes interaction and communication among learners (Aydin, 2013). However, the issues such as cost, technical problems and age pose as some notable limitations in the way of using SL efficiently in language learning. Aydin (2013) concluded that SL provides great opportunities for language learning though it has also some potential drawbacks.

Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the studies reviewed, several conclusions on SL's role in the level of speaking anxiety level among EFL learners can be reached. First, studies conducted so far indicate that new measures have been constantly taken in language learning environments since speaking anxiety is a widely acknowledged issue among EFL learners. Furthermore, considering the changing characteristics of the educational environments, recent educational platforms seem to be introduced to the learning process for the sake of reducing the tension experienced by the learners. Second, it is evident that the introduction of virtual environments provides EFL learners with a new platform on which they can both experience language performance and maintain the peace of mind by lowering the anxiety level. Third, SL is quite practical in terms of disabling the affective barriers that EFL learners set against the language learning activities by providing a feeling of distance to reality. Hence, it is widely appreciated that SL provides learners/participants with a secure environment in which they are able to hide their identities, which enables an anxiety-free interaction and language practice with other members. Fourth, even though SL is a pragmatic language practice tool which has been observed to have reduced speaking anxiety among foreign language learners in several studies, along with its useful functions, it brings about difficulties with setting up the appropriate learning/teaching environments due to technical complexities. Last, the lack of empirical data about the effect of SL on speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners is quite noteworthy in the way of understanding its function in language learning context.

Based on the conclusions reached on the place of SL in language learning process, the main issue to be considered is that the integration of SL into the language learning requires technical knowledge. Therefore, the teachers are expected to be quite resourceful in terms of technological awareness (Aydın, 2013b). In addition, it is evident that the students are not equally equipped with a technological background. Thus, it is feasible to assume that an instructional session is necessary prior to commencing SL language learning activities, since the key issue in consulting to SL as a language practice tool is to reduce anxiety, not to confront students with an additional stress factor. Another issue about the use of SL is based on the dilemma whether SL is an indispensable tool which keeps learners more focused than normal circumstances or it is a tool which is open to various types of abuse. Therefore, it is vital for teacher to keep the language learning process taking place in SL in control in a way that would not harm the anxiety-free nature of the learning. Moreover, it can be suggested that SL is a practical tool in EFL learning activities which presumably reduces the anxiety among EFL learners. However, the methods and the techniques used in the language practices are not dependent on a well-established framework. Thus, it is crucial to realize that the teachers should back up the SL-integrated learning processes with solid theoretical infrastructure by determining the outcomes, the objectives and the procedures clearly to avoid losing the control of the teaching/learning. Without designating the steps to be taken in the language activities that

take place in SL, the process might take damage, failing to serve as an aid that reduces the learners' anxiety levels.

Considering the abovementioned issues on SL, it is clear that it has a potential as an educational tool, and it is even possible to say that it is applicable in language learning environments. The technological improvements require both teachers and learners to keep up with the swift pacing of technology. Thus, it is necessary to integrate technology with educational activities. In this sense, SL might serve as a combination of many useful educational tools in an educational context, and it is already a focus point of many educators. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the possibility of the use of SL efficiently in learning environments. In order to form a view on the issue, the role of SL as anxiety reducer in language performance as mentioned above draws a great deal of attention. However, as a final note, although the studies conducted mention the relationship between SL and anxiety, they do not highlight specific skills, especially speaking.

The number of the studies which are related to the use of virtual environments such as SL as a learning tool is quite limited. Moreover, it is evident that the research dealing with the possible effectiveness of SL as language learning tool in Turkish EFL context in terms of the question whether it reduces the anxiety or not is of limit. Although the research that mentions the possibility of the use of SL as language learning tool is in existence, more specific details and more empirical data are required in order to assume if there is a contribution that is made by SL to reducing the anxiety level of language learners in speaking. Furthermore, the framework which is drawn by the abovementioned studies establishes a basis for this study even though it is not directly related to the starting question that this paper builds upon. Therefore, taking into consideration the limited suggestions provided by these studies, it is necessary to add up more empirical data to the pile and provide different dimensions such as the possible relationship between the use of SL as language learning tool and speaking anxiety.

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