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Dramatic activities and ICTE in Language Acquisition: Learning a foreign language for professional/specific purposes through Role Plays and Online Games

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Abstract: Researchers in performative teaching have laid the stress on the motivation of learners who can express their creative fiber freely thanks to the value of dramatic activities in language classes. Drama and dramatic activities promote the development of competences along the lines of the Common European Framework for language learning. They help learners to broaden their knowledge of the world, to strengthen or acquire new skills and know-how, to consolidate their existential competences as well as their ability to learn. They also promote the improvement of communicative language competences (in terms of linguistic skills, sociolinguistic abilities and pragmatic capacities). They are particularly relevant in the context of an action-oriented approach to language learning for university students in Business English. Putting them into realistic situations through dramatic activities facilitates their learning of English. However, the differences of capacities among learners might hamper their acknowledgment of all the benefits of drama. The increase of IT tools with a pedagogical purpose multiplies the strategies to strengthen the aforementioned competences. Therefore, virtual environments like *Second Life*, in which games can be implemented, might be an alternative to improve the learners' competences.

Keywords: blended learning, drama, ESP, higher education, language learning, language teaching, online games, virtual environments

The value of drama activities in language classes has been demonstrated for numerous years now. Researchers have laid the stress on the motivation of learners who can express their creative fiber freely (Aden 2009). Drama and dramatic activities promote the development of general competences along the lines of the Common European Framework for language learning. They help learners to broaden their knowledge of the world, to strengthen or acquire new skills and know-how, to consolidate their existential competences as well as their ability to learn. They also promote the improvement of communicative language competences (in terms of linguistic skills, sociolinguistic abilities and pragmatic capacities). They are particularly relevant in the context of an action-oriented approach to language learning for university students in Business English. Putting university students into realistic situations through dramatic activities facilitates their learning of English.

However, it cannot be denied that the differences of capacities and personalities among learners might hamper their acknowledgment of all the benefits of drama. Therefore, the increase of IT tools with a pedagogical purpose multiplies the strategies to strengthen the competences mentioned above. Indeed, the creation of avatars on virtual environments like *Second Life* might be an alternative or an additional channel to improve the learners' competences.

This paper presents the observations drawing on an experiment carried out over three months with two groups of second year students in Business English. The students were given the same pedagogical scenarios, they had the same pragmatic and linguistic objectives, but the educational devices differed. One group was required to practice online, the other in the classroom.

After explaining what the preparation phase consisted in so as to determine the extent to which both drama activities and virtual worlds improve the communicative language competences, we shall examine, from the feedback of the students, how both devices lead to the autonomy of the learners in real business situations.

1. Preparation phase

The Common European Framework was considered as a reference document and as the starting point for this experiment. The objective was to make the students feel they could become independent communicative social and professional speakers in English. After studying the educational value of drama for a long time, we thought we could blend it with a new increasingly popular device in language learning, virtual worlds, the use of which can be associated to that of serious games. We have been interested in the playful aspect of language learning (also known as “edutainment”) since we got inspired by the work of Johann Huizinga who wrote about the value of play in humanity across the times in *Homo Ludens* as well as the writings of Winnicott who thought that “playing facilitates growth and therefore health” (Winnicott, 56). Winnicott stated that “playing involves creativity and in being creative, we discover ourselves”. (Winnicott, 72) Then discovering ourselves “helps us to be aware of our capacities and therefore learn better” (Winnicott, 72).

In this part, we shall explain briefly the steps to implement the plays and the games, what the scenarios consisted in and what was expected from the students.

a) Creating the scenarios

The idea of devising pedagogical scenarios for theatre plays, virtual worlds and online games originated from a lecture we were in charge of at the beginning of September 2013 about customer relationship management. Since we did not have enough classes to have the students practice, we asked for nine volunteers to participate in the scenarios. The notion of “scenarios” is really important if we use synthetic worlds and video games for an educational purpose. As a matter of fact, in his PhD thesis, Alvarez explains that the pedagogical scenario, which meets a precise objective, is the condition for a video game to become a serious game. (Alvarez,14)¹. We did not have any difficulty in finding them even though this represented between three and five supplementary English classes for them. The students were seduced by the multimodality and the playful quality of the devices.

The original plan was to create three groups of three students: one practicing online, another only in class, and the last, alternatively in class and online along the lines of blended learning. Our idea was to check which method was the most effective since plays and games are activities where the students can be creative and free, which are motivating factors in language learning.

The choice of the best and most accurate games that could be used online for free and that could meet the set objectives was asked to a couple of experts we had met at e-learning gatherings previously. Not only were they ready to help us, but they also insisted on embarking with us on our educational journey. That is how we made up a team of specialists: the English teacher was in charge of checking the linguistic competences of the students, a teacher in marketing was the specialist in CRM, the vice director of the virtual university of Lyon 3 (France) and another teacher in virtual learning were the administrative experts; lastly a sound and light engineer was in charge of the technical support. The five of us met many times before the games and plays could start because many details had to be agreed upon: notably the scenarios, the objectives, the dates, the places and the tasks.

They eventually recommended downloading the software called *Second Life*. Advertisers of the software write that “training simulations are incredibly powerful in *Second Life* because they simulate

¹ “Quoi qu’il en soit, ce “scénario pédagogique” qui entre en jeu dès la conception de l’application pour répondre à un ‘objectif pédagogique’ nous semble être la composante qui pourrait peut-être spécifier le serious game, sur le plan informatique. Avec cette approche, nous pouvons avancer l’idée qu’un serious game se distinguerait ainsi du jeu vidéo dont on détourne a posteriori le principe d’utilisation. Puisque dans ce dernier cas, il s’agit d’ajouter l’objectif pédagogique a posteriori, par une approche purement cognitive, sans implémenter de ce fait un ‘scénario pédagogique’.”

complex processes in the physical world and avatars can take on different roles to enhance learning". This, as well as the fact it was free, is one of the reasons why the experts advised to download it. We were really curious to see the potential of that software. Since it took a long time to get ready, the team agreed to have only two scenarios and not three as originally thought. The teachers and the students had to create their own avatars, which enabled them, as players, for the first time in history to become the spectators of their own actions (translating Tisseron in "Sens et Fonctions des avatars"). The students (and the teachers) were thus both actors and spectators, an idea that echoes the concept of "spect-actors" coined by dramaturg Augusto Boal whose goal was to liberate the individuals through forum drama. To some extent, the use of plays and games are also a means to liberate the students who can learn freely.

The avatars of the students were all members of a virtual company we had imagined called "Copets". In *Second Life*, the technical expert built the virtual offices of the company while in the classroom, we could not materialize it concretely. The activity of the company was the selling of pet toys in the UK.

The first scenario consisted in managing the anger of a dissatisfied customer calling the headquarters of "Copets". This customer (played by the English teacher) was angry due to the possible death of her dog after it played with a toy bought at one of "Copets" ' stores in London. The customer explained that a part of the toy had come off engendering the suffocation of her dog. The students had to deal with the customer and find solutions for both the customer and the defective toy.

The second scenario was linked to the first one. It took place three weeks later. The members of the marketing department of "Copets" realized that due to numerous incidents with toys from one supplier in particular they had lost customers (this information was given to them). They needed to find a new strategy to win customers back. So, they gathered and discussed new plans.

Because the software was not particularly easy to master, and because some students could not download it correctly or could use neither a microphone nor headphones properly (due to technical problems that the technical expert could not fix), only 6 students could participate in the experiment. The decision to create two groups of three was made, and the idea of blended learning was given up for that year.

b) What was expected from the students

From the very beginning the students were told what was expected of them and what they were going to be evaluated on in terms of general and linguistic competences. They were indeed given a summary of the scenarios. Therefore, they had been advised to go through the marketing lectures and English courses they had learnt before and that would enable them to communicate properly in the situations indicated. We followed the recommendations of the Common European Framework as far as the learning of languages was concerned so that the students were taught in the most appropriate manner. On the other hand, using new technologies also helped them to meet the recommendations of the European key competencies for lifelong learning document (key competence 4: digital competence).

The courses were based on a series of tasks that would enable the students to reach the objective of the scenarios progressively. Added to this, our personal objective was to help them transfer their knowledge and put into practice what they had learnt before but with a professional purpose and still in the context of the learning process (not in reality)².

² cf. Bourdet, p. 43 "Nous proposons, pour ce faire, de réfléchir à la notion de potentiel de transférabilité, ce qui renvoie à la construction d'un ensemble d'attitudes (au sens de la psychologie sociale qui coordonne ici représentations et schèmes d'actions). C'est l'existence de ces attitudes qui va permettre, en contexte différent, d'appréhender les variations et de

The skills and abilities that had to be consolidated were classified along three groups: grammar, vocabulary and pragmatics. In this respect, both virtual worlds and role plays had their importance since they required the students to work not only with their minds but also with their bodies, therefore, to manage space. Aden, who has long demonstrated the values of drama in English classes, indeed observed that the bodies of students are not mere standard lamps which would carry thinking heads.³ The interaction that was advocated by the teachers could thus be verbal or non-verbal or both (especially when they could not remember a word in particular), the goal was to make oneself understood. *Second Life* was here again the perfect choice since the publicists would write that “*Second Life* was designed as a social networking platform — to encourage social interaction. It enables deeply immersive, meaningful, and memorable experiences.” And we personally think that this experiment was memorable if we look at the feedback we got.

2. Feedback

We will first start with the impressions of the team of teachers and experts supervising the experiment before giving an account of what the students felt.

a) From the teachers/ impressions when implementing the scenarios during and after the experience

From our personal viewpoint, we can acknowledge many advantages of the devices as far as learning was concerned. The students could express themselves freely, they had to be creative, when words or grammar were missing, they could rely on body interaction and on their peers. It is true that body interaction was more resorted to in the classroom than in *Second Life* since the software is not very easy to master, but the students managed well to express what they wanted to express. However, some limits to both practices could be noticed. We consider it more important to highlight the obstacles so as to offer solutions and devise a more efficient plan for future classes

Firstly, the implementation of the simulation was time consuming. In such an experiment, one must take into account the time spent before the learning situations. The preparation required a lot of organization since it was necessary to draw up an agenda, create the scenarios, build up the team etc. Then, it was crucial to try the software and teach the students how to manipulate it. Because of the various capacities of the students, this training did not cover only one hour, but many. Even during the performance, there were still technical problems, despite the intervention of the technical expert. Our wish would have been that the simulation on the virtual world was not synchronous but that was impossible.

We became aware that the drama techniques were far easier and faster to implement than serious games on virtual worlds because there were obviously fewer technical problems.

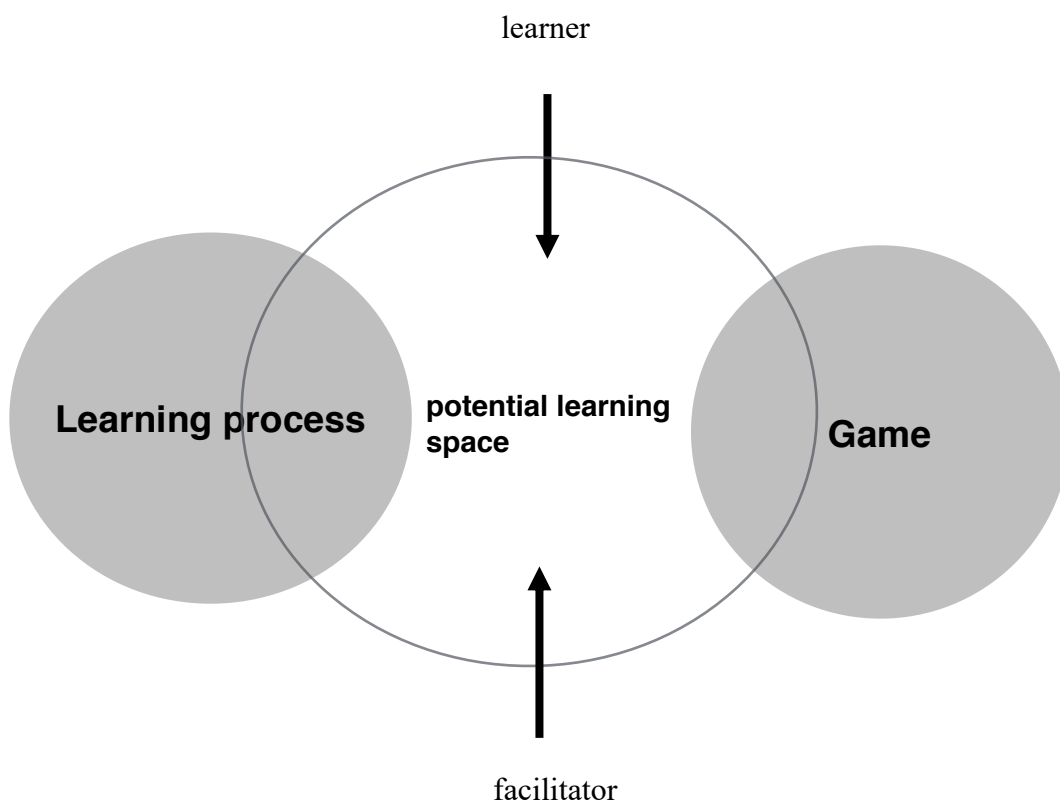
The marketing teacher could not stay until the end of the experiment because she had other responsibilities calling her elsewhere. We deeply regret this situation. So, it is really important to find a reliable team from the very beginning so that the learning process might be more coherent for both teachers and students.

In the light of all this, the team of teachers became facilitators to teach linguistic and general competences. This idea is supported by Alvarez when he asserts that the presence of a medium is a master

reformer ses schèmes pour s'adapter à la situation en tirant parti de compétences : on recourt à des compétences déjà éprouvées et, de fait, on les conceptualise en les réinvestissant.”

³ cf. Aden, J., 2009, p. 179 : “il est temps que l'école s'intéresse aux apprenants dans leur globalité et qu'elle cesse de considérer leur corps comme des lampadaires qui soutiendraient des têtes pensantes.”

component⁴ of the learning process as shown in the following graph (reproduced from Alvarez, p.117) :



b) From the students

It was really important for us to get some feedback from the students about the experiment since their remarks could help us improve the use of the devices. In this case, we wanted to know if we could keep on using both devices in the future.

We can classify their remarks along two lines: the improvement of their linguistic competences, and the development of their general abilities. The students who participated in the online games in *Second Life* are called a, b, c and those who practiced in the classroom are students d, e and f.

The improvement of their linguistic capacities

- student a (who was one of the best students) liked the fact that he could practice English in a small group. Indeed, his English was good before the experiment, but he had never dared talk in front of the whole class.
- student b said he was relieved not to have to talk to real people. It was easier for him to find his words and take care over his grammar and pronunciation. He felt no pressure so he could take his time to think about what he was going to say and how he was going to say it.

⁴ cf. Alvarez, p. 117 : “Ce qui nous renvoie à l’approche de Winnicott et à sa notion ‘d’*aire intermédiaire*’. Ainsi le jeune apprenant se situerait entre ce qu’il peut apprendre par lui-même et ce qu’il peut apprendre grâce notamment à un tiers. La présence de ce dernier semble donc être une composante maîtresse dans le champ de l’apprentissage.”

- student c asserted that she liked the fact it was a small group. Through this experiment, she came to realize how spontaneous and reactive she could become when speaking English.
- student d was an anxious student, always ready to participate in experiments so as to improve her English level. As a matter of fact, her grammar was not reliable, but she learnt by heart all the words we had told them to learn since their first year, so she did not lack any vocabulary. She had phonological problems though. She said that she felt reassured by the smallness of the room which facilitated the proximity between the students right from the start and so enhanced confidence. She really appreciated the fact that she could support her colleagues when they were at a loss for words. She liked the fact that she could talk freely without being marked by the teacher. Yet she regretted the fact that the atmosphere was too relaxed at times and because of this lack seriousness, her linguistic performances were not at their maximum.
- student e appreciated the fact that he could practice in a realistic situation what he had learnt before. He could then realize that he was able to talk in English for one hour even if his grammar, phonology and lexicon were not reliable enough. He liked the fact that the performances were recorded because he could criticize what he had said and how he had behaved.
- student f could see that she could rely on the others when she was at a loss for words.

The evolution of their general competences

- student a was frustrated not to know how to use the software to its full potential. He wished he had had a better training beforehand and had experienced fewer technical difficulties.
- student b pointed out the freedom he had throughout the whole experience. He was the student who knew how to use the software best.
- student c had a lot of problems (technical mainly) with the software and because of that, could not concentrate on and follow the conversations.
- student d also pointed out the freedom they had in finding solutions, proposing strategies etc, the relaxed atmosphere (but to some extent only as she had already observed), the correction by her peers.
- student e also pointed out the degree of creativity required and liked the playful aspect of the device,
- student f really appreciated the fact that she was immersed in the situation and had to cope with all she had.

Generally speaking, the students would recommend the use of such devices but advised the teachers to give the full detailed scenarios well before the performance to avoid silences (in *Second Life*) or misunderstandings (one student thought that the dog was dead when she had recovered). They also shed light on the importance of having feedback from the teachers immediately after the performances so as to not make the same mistakes in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude, technological devices such as online games on virtual worlds are good pedagogical devices for the best students (or even professionals) because they need to master the new technologies of information and communication (which might be a new obstacle for learning languages) and that dramatic activities and theatre plays are best for students less at ease with new technologies because there is no new technology to master. It is precisely because they are complementary that both theatre plays and online games lead to the autonomy of the learner. We do not think that online games convey autonomy alone since it is really important to interact with real people in real life (our bodies being part of our personalities and individual beings), and we are sure that some people cannot freely express themselves through dramatic activities from the start and that sometimes they need some distance from the learning process to be able to get back to it in a more efficient manner. In the future,

the team of teachers agreed to start a reflection on the segmentation of competences so that all kinds of students may access both devices. We deeply encourage this practice and will inscribe our experience within blended learning in the future with new chosen students.

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