



## Teacher Training and Mentoring in 3D Environments: A Brief Report of Two EFL Teachers

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### Introduction

The present study aimed at investigating the impact of Second Life (SL) on Iranian EFL teachers' professional development and beliefs in 3D online teaching. Populated by computer-generated avatars, Second Life (SL) is a three-dimensional virtual world which was created as an innovative form of shared experience, in which individuals conjointly dwell in a 3D environment and build the world around them. People can travel to and live on Second Life spots through their computer avatars. When a Second Life occupant makes his own avatar, he can go to a plethora of public places to explore several activities, including shopping, going to the tea club, and other similar activities. Such simulated educational settings have been used to help teachers gain more hands-on experiences managing their students in online classes. In view of the fact that only two SL teachers are "the cases" of this study, a case study research design was used to investigate these phenomena. Using action research (AR), this study examined how Iranian EFL teachers shifted their role from a knowledgeable, traditional classroom teacher to an online SL instructor, hence recreating their teacher identity and developing professional growth.

### Mohsen and Hamed: The SL teachers and their Classes

**Mohsen.** Having received an M.A. in TEFL, Mohsen has been an English teacher at the university level since 2010. The study was conducted at Bahar Institute of Higher Education, Iran, where he teaches TEFL students, academic writing. Notwithstanding the well-designed course, Mohsen detected that TEFL students found the program *mind-numbing* since its syllabus emphasized heavily grammatical structures and academic writing styles. The incongruity between the nature of the course and the learning interests of the students resulted in their detachment and distracted attention to other irrelevant activities. This crucial matter observed by Mohsen inspired him to find resolutions to help students.

**Hamed.** Having earned a PhD in ELT, Hamed started his teaching career at the university level in 2008. He also teaches in the same institute mentioned above although he teaches conversation courses to TEFL students. He witnessed the same monotonous attitude in students and decided to integrate an online version of the course to motivate students. The same 3D virtual environment was recommended by the researcher to him as well. Both agreed to utilize this new platform. The following section describes how their action plans were conducted and documented.



## Teacher Development and Syllabus Design in SL

To conform with the institute's obligatory policies, the recommended online courses ran three hours per week over a sixteen-week term similar to the traditional courses. What differentiated the online course from the traditional one was that Mohsen and Hamed carried out each online session in a computer lab in which students accessed PCs, having intranet via the wired interface, to do the given tasks in SL. Both instructors, i.e. Mohsen as well as Hamed, and the students utilized their avatars to communicate with each other. They used voice chat to do SL tasks, and text chat to elucidate meaning and concepts. Two WhatsApp groups were also created for students to practice conversation and writing by responding to and posting lesson-related topics after each session. All students were informed of the objective of this study and they knew that this online *course* was a substitute for their normal class and lesson lectures would be conducted in SL. These groups of students had never experienced an online course beforehand and expressed excessive interest in ameliorating their spoken and written skills in the 3D virtual world. They were all adolescent learners aged 18 to 24 and spoke Persian (Farsi) as their L1. Their agreement was collected before the study commenced.

Mohsen and Hamed began a succession of teacher training sessions on how to facilitate the task distribution in the virtual class. These training courses were directed and delivered by the researcher. They first created their avatars on SL's *Welcome Island* and experienced key roles.

## Finding and Discussion

*SlimWiki* (<https://slimwiki.com/>), a free wiki site for file sharing and teamwork, was chosen as a space for Mohsen and Hamed to record and share their teaching portfolio in SL. They sent their thoughts and opinions of their teaching practices and assessed student responses to SL tasks immediately after each session. *Video-recorded classes* were used as evidence-based sources to make their reflections faster. As stated in previous studies, technical issues are common in SL teaching (Chen, 2016a, 2016b; Dawley & Dede, 2014; Peterson, 2010). Leading SL sessions in a lab offers a more stable internet connection to satisfy the needs of 3D graphics, "voice quality, headset problems" disturbed the lesson, management of virtual class and task assignment and "it entails a lot of time, training for the teacher and students and technical knowledge" (Mohsen, interview, 18/11/2020).

Hamed scrutinized this aspect in his interview: "I think running the class in a computer lab held me and students back – for me, it held me back from completely engaging in a virtual teaching. For students, my presence in the lab meant that they couldn't fully experience their virtual experience and language learning...my students and I didn't have an option but to use the avatar" (Hamed, interview, 19/11/2020).

Although Mohsen was an experienced classroom teacher, his online teaching in SL discloses perceptive features for education and research. He observed the instructional SL could alter a teacher-centered class, concentrating more on grammar and academic writing to an exciting learner-centered adventure playground, pitched more to authentic task communication. His observation of augmented student involvement and enthusiasm authenticated his positive insight about the impact of 3D virtual teaching on student learning outcomes. He reported in his interview (19/11/2020) the noticeable difference in teaching in SL as opposed to a traditional class, stating the observable progress in oral performance of students who were inclined to be quiet but began to use voice chat. Overall, SL has enormous capabilities for language learning classrooms. It has the capacity to draw student attention in an innovative and exciting way compared to traditional teaching which many language students are fed up with.

In Mohsen's case, the tools (Chen, 2016b, 2018) realized in text chat "increased writing output" (Mohsen, interview, 19/11/2020) and in Hamed's case, speaking via avatar "provided the students with inconspicuousness and self-assurance to speak in English more than in a face-to-face class" (Hamed, interview, 18/11/2020). Although it was gratifying to see that Hamed's students were inspired and

enthusiastic to communicate, the diverse opinions about removing the teacher control shows the modification in his teacher identity from a classroom teacher to a SL teacher. As Hamed honestly commented in his interview (18/11/2016), “the weakened quantity of control that you have as a teacher ... not being able to go over to each student and check how they were doing the tasks, but rely merely on SL Chat/Voice, made me feel belittled. It was difficult to let the students have their own experiences. It was difficult for me, but possibly far better for them”. As a result of his experiences, Hamed’s mindset about teacher empowerment has changed as he stated “teachers ought to be in control or would be useless” (Hamed, interview, 18/11/2020). The new-fangled thinking that he was required to have a new online teacher’s face rather than sticking to his classroom teaching persona transformed his identity as a teacher.

### **Task-Based Language Teaching in SL**

The anxieties of task procedure and authentic communication led to Mohsen’s initial uncertainties about the efficiency of this innovative method. Surprisingly, observing students take control of their learning in SL strengthened his online teaching, as shown in this statement: “Numerous pupils defined writing online as being more exhilarating, motivating, amusing, inspiring and I could obviously see the advantages for their speaking skills and augmented self-assurance in using the target language” (Mohsen, interview, 19/11/2020).

When commenting on the actual task completion, Hamed mentioned the advantages and drawbacks of task design regarding student feedback. Initially, the most repetitive outline in his opinion was the “entertaining and gratification” factor in that “students were very involved in the tasks and enjoyed listening to each other’s imageries”, “This was a fun task and illuminating instructions formed a lot of speaking” (Hamed, interview, 19/11/2020). However, Hamed also assessed the shortcomings of this task-based approach that often was stalled by SL technical issues, repeating the cautions stated in previous SL research (Chen, 2016b; Dawley & Dede, 2014; Kozlova & Priven, 2015). Technical problems stopped the implementation of the task. “Oral production was still difficult for most students but others were just perplexed by all the noise and kept quiet”; “Students’ SL skills needed to be stronger to complete this activity more successfully. The complexity of object building menus meant that there was quite a bit of confusion” (Mohsen, interview, 18/11/2020). These problems show the importance of harmonizing the levels of SL skills mandatory for tasks and students’ accountability and knowledge of technical skills (Dawley & Dede, 2014).

Even though Hamed observed students’ improved levels of task involvement, impetus and remarkable oral production, he felt that grammar shouldn’t have been ignored. Hamed had a belief that “...if students were able to communicate with atypical grammar, they were successful in the task” (Hamed, interview, 19/11/2020).

### **Action Research Approach in Professional Development in SL**

As posted in his blog, Mohsen believed that teaching in a 3D virtual environment was not something he saw himself doing. He said: “I’ve assumed online teaching was a bit apprehensive but teaching as an avatar, communicating with other avatars who are real students is a silly thing. But I found myself engaged in a project that asks me to learn new skills and bring me out of my boundaries with which I felt comfortable”. (Mohsen, blog post, 25/09/2020). Mohsen’s first blog post clearly showed his ambition for and trepidation of entering the new area in online teaching. His teaching in each SL session was entirely documented in his reflective blogging for a 2-month period. This approach shows the crux of AR: “practitioners’ evidence-based observations and critical reflections of the action plan outcomes before further informed decisions could be made” (Burns, 2016, p. 51). It also empowers the supervisor to deliver continuing, efficient command to address the teacher’s questions and give setting-specific leadership to ameliorate the teachings (Sato & Chen, 2021).

To learn the SL skills required for the online teaching, Hamed documented how he was trained, acquired SL roles, experienced preliminary hindrances with the technical details and obtained confidence in learning those roles as is exemplified in the following: “Now that I see myself a bit more confident with my skills, my chief concentration is now on utilizing SL as a teaching tool!” (Hamed, blog post, 20/07/2020). In his first experience of creating an avatar, Hamed said the process was devastating and thought-provoking and his initial opinion about teaching in SL vs. real life was challenged:

*The first task I preferred to do was to change my avatar. I'd firstly selected a male avatar with short hair. I have already thought about the first impression I will have on students. I had changed the appearance of my avatar seven times to reach a final decision on my avatar's outfit!* (Hamed, blog post, 18/07/2020)

This made Hamed more aware of the importance of such things in 3D virtual teaching which was accompanied by the feeling of elation through learning and understanding SL skills. It also shows the cause of turning teachers into SL avatars and the feelings of confidence in simulated teaching (Cheong, 2010). The crucial point to efficaciously applying TBLT in SL pertains to teachers' readiness of task design “in conjunction with the 3D technology used” (Kozlova & Priven, 2015, p. 85).

Fascinatingly, Mohsen's classroom-based teaching philosophies facilitated his progression and informed his online teaching. Albeit he recognized that teaching in SL required him to be “elastic”, his previous classroom teaching experience was useful as he stated: “it was more beneficial to meet students face to face before moving completely online and build some rapport” (blog post, 09/09/2020). Another case is when Mohsen finally performed his first class and appreciated “how long it took for the technical details to be prepared and audio testing was difficult” (Mohsen, blog post, 15/09/2020).

Kozlova and Priven (2015) believed that teachers learn as they teach and lessons from mentors can be used in their teaching practices. What helps teachers progress was to develop context-based strategies, thereby nurturing a better wisdom of self-efficacy (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Goodnough, 2010; Yuan & Burns, 2017). This fact has been reflected in the following post by Hamed:

*Next week our actual SL classes will start. As my own SL skills have fully grown and advanced over a few weeks, I'm sure students will learn this rapidly, but I forestall that I will certainly have to use my own knowledge to guide and inspire my class.* (Blog post, 13/09/2020).

Problems such as “SL is awkward”, “Wi-fi cut”, and “voice problems”, all brought about the “high levels of frustration” but, as stated in Hamed's blog, the students' involvement was the most crucial aspect of SL and the pace did not pause due to technology quandaries (blog post, 16/09/2020) or “...I've learned that teaching in SL necessitates pupils to take more responsibility for their learning and entails the instructor to allow things to reveal without the luxuries of a face-to-face class”. (Blog post, 19/09/2020).

Observing the positive influences of SL on the levels of task involvement and oral productions confirmed Hamed's application of this pioneering approach through AR (Banegas et al., 2013; Sowa, 2009). Similarly vital is the directed supervision and support provided for instructors such as Mohsen and Hamed during their SL teaching. Difficulties faced in their teaching ought to be appraised prudently and fixed particularly when uncertainties arise in the early phase (Kozlova & Priven, 2015; Lin et al., 2014).

The following extracts show how Mohsen and Hamed felt about their mentor and how he could help them deal with unanticipated qualms in the preparation phase:

**Mohsen:** *I've written lesson plans to teach SL class based on a face-to-face English language class experience. But I have no idea whether this is the correct approach to take. I feel anxious as it is difficult to know if students understand me without being able to see my body language. Will I be able to involve students and improve their learning experience?* (Blog post, 23/07/2020)

**Researcher Mentor:** *Due to the fact that it's your first-time teaching in SL, all the worries are usual and reasonable. I admit that it's difficult to see students' facial expressions in SL as compared with real classes. It would be thought-provoking to realize if lack of paralinguistic features would facilitate or hamper teacher's insights about teaching English in SL.*

SL sessions were videorecorded, which provide the mentor with evidence-based lessons and assists him to better witness the online activities and talk with the teacher about the strengths and weaknesses of that day's class. Online supervision equally profited the teacher and researcher in terms of "professional development and teacher training throughout AR" (Rovegno & Pintos, 2017, p. 32).

The final extracts show how Hamed mirrored his general experience of his teaching in SL. He described some useful lessons learned, such as training sessions for students on how to work in SL. His mentor replied by giving opinions on his teaching practicum and recommendations on his future teaching in SL:

**Hamed:** *Each week numerous technical problems were observed, leading to much leadership to support students to thrive in doing the task. It shows what a marvelous opportunity it is for a teacher to learn how to change from face-to-face teaching, to teaching in a 3D virtual environment. Also, the most significant lesson to learn is to provide technical training for students. (Blog post, 17/12/2020)*

**Researcher Mentor:** *I agree with your point that to be successful in a virtual class, we do need to mitigate those technical issues and improve our students' tech skills. One of the most important reasons that students feel anxious about SL technical requirements is that they only use SL when they attend the class.*

The above extracts were a sample of the conversations exchanged between the project mentor and Mohsen and Hamed. They reveal that it is feasible to run teacher training and supervision in a virtual setting. Teachers can also take advantage of ongoing supervision given by the mentors in every "step of the AR process through user-friendly digital platforms, such as blogs or Google Docs" (Sato & Chen, 2021, p. 318).

## Conclusions and Implications

Implications obtained based on the present action research, narrative study give future instructions for teacher trainers to alleviate unanticipated drawbacks: It is essential to have an appropriate SL site and examine SL devices to avoid student misperceptions as caused by noise problems. Also, 3D online teaching requires cautious lesson planning and discussion with the mentor to guarantee that a multifaceted task can run more effortlessly. Furthermore, students benefit from constant technical support and it is essential that they familiarize themselves with SL outside of class. These lessons offer strategies for teacher development in a 3D environment. Besides, these invaluable points reveal how AR can bring about more advantageous suggestions that reply to the context requirements of experts (Burns, 2015, 2016).

Equally important are Mohsen's and Hamed's continuing reflections on their online teaching via blogging, advocated with the researcher (Sato & Chen, 2021). Virtual supervision was created to aid the teachers through watching the recorded clips, giving feedback on teaching practices and answering their blog posts. The teachers in the present study had sufficient chances to voice their beliefs as a SL instructor and receive tailored assistance, leading to the development of their online teaching efficacy (Cheong, 2010; Rovegno & Pintos, 2017). Kozlova and Priven (2015) contend that teaching in a 3D context could be "...difficult, time consuming, and practically impossible for novice teachers to explore

the environment and to learn how to teach in such environments on their own” (p. 98). Mohsen’s and Hamed’s stories also reveal teaching strategies, reflections, SL involvement and task assignments which emphasize their flexibility to defeat different predicaments (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Yuan & Burns, 2017).

Teaching in a virtual environment is stimulating. However, technological, educational, assessment skills are advanced simultaneously in 3D contexts (Compton, 2009). Inexperienced apprentice instructors continue filtering their teaching skills, being shaped by new understandings and reflections obtained from their professional development (Kozlova & Priven, 2015). This narrative study shows that though teaching English in SL is challenging, it could be as academically encouraging to students as it is fulfilling to teachers.

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