

Practicing English Conversation for EFL Students in an Online 3D Virtual World

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Abstract – Many scholars hold the view that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners have very limited opportunities to engage in a real English context. This paper presents results of a study about practicing English conversation, in written form, through text-based chat. The chat was undertaken in a computer-based 3D virtual world. This paper also covers the students' perception towards the online 3D virtual world for practicing English. By employing single subject experimental design, the results show that practicing English conversation through an online 3D virtual world can improve students' English written communication content. This study also suggests that students have positive perception towards online 3D virtual world as a platform for practicing English conversation. The implication of this study and suggestion for further research are discussed.

Keywords – 3D virtual world, EFL, English conversation, Text-based chat

I. INTRODUCTION

We are at present witnessing a rapid increase in the use of English as a language of wider communication (Smith, 2015). However, in many parts of the world, English is still considered as a foreign language (i.e. Panggabean, 2015). In other words, most EFL learners have no chance to be exposed to English culture and they mostly do not use English on a daily basis (Abushihab, 2016).

Fortunately, the development and ubiquity of internet has affected language education. The abundance of resources on internet has brought convenience in language learning (Chen, 2013). Thus, EFL students can easily learn English anywhere and anytime. In recent days, for instance, there are many English platforms available online. Some of them are social network, video messengers, and 3D virtual worlds.

Among other platforms, 3D virtual worlds have special features which unavailable in typical online platforms like social networks or messengers. In this sense, virtual worlds allow participants to interact simultaneously with other players from other countries through representation of avatars (Yeh & Wan, 2016). Thus, it provides a space for English language learners to increase confidence and comfort and to overcome cultural barriers for learning English (Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009).

In fact, as reported by Lan (2015), many literatures support the use of online virtual world in English education because of its potential of providing EFL learners with the needed language contexts without any temporal barrier as well as the potential of enhancing EFL learners' language competences.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Broadly speaking, EFL settings have very limited opportunities to engage in a real English context (i.e. Marwan, 2007). There are some studies which have discussed the difficulties encountered by EFL learners in practicing English conversation (Hosni, 2014). In Indonesia, for instance, a teacher reported that students readily mock anyone who tries to use English in public (Lamb, 2007).

The reluctance to use English on a daily basis is also found in several non-English-speaking countries. For example, in Turkey, it is found that EFL learners have fear of being negatively evaluated when making mistakes, particularly in front of their friends (Dil, 2009). Likewise, EFL learners in Oman also perceived that making mistakes in front of their classmates is very embarrassing (Al Hosni, 2014). Consequently many EFL learners are afraid to use English in a real context (Lamb, 2007).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Platforms

Technology has brought a drastic change in the world and has revolutionized education. With a range of possible solutions to develop EFL learning, technology has becoming a successful medium for practicing English conversation. Additionally, technology is also able to present authentic situations where learners unable to see in real life situations (Diyab, 2014). With the massive growth of online conversation platforms, it becomes easier for language learners to practice English with people from other countries.

In terms of online conversation platforms, Wakefield & Rice (2008) point out that text messaging, instant messaging, chat rooms, and personal web sites have increased the speed of multiple and simultaneous interaction. Based on this fact, it is indispensable to take advantage of modern technological facilities in aiding the task of English language practices (Hwang, Huang, Shadiev, Wu, & Chen, 2014). This technology provides many new potential channels for promoting English conversation among people who live in different countries (Wu, Yen & Marek, 2011). Among online conversation platforms, there is one type of platforms that replicates a real world situation, which known as 3D Virtual Worlds.

Online 3D Virtual Worlds

Before the age of internet, one of the biggest challenges faced in learning foreign language was using the language in a real context. The opportunities for EFL students to interact with native speakers of English were rare. But by

the development of electronic communication technologies, namely email, messenger and social networking, it is now possible for language learners of all ages and levels to communicate with anyone, anywhere, and anytime (Nur, 2010). Of late, there are many online platforms that can promote English conversation among EFL students. One of them is a 3D virtual world.

Online 3D Virtual world is a computer-based application that replicates a three-dimensional environment in which users can appear in the form of avatars and interact with each other as they would in real life (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The interaction is facilitated by the 3D environment that makes the multi users feel the sensation of being in a real world. The users have a concrete presence virtually which facilitates interaction and communication among users (Robbins, 2008).

Today, there are several virtual worlds have been created in 3D graphical performance with different styles, features, functions and purposes. Most of the virtual worlds environment setting are fantasy world which cannot be found in real world, but some of them duplicate real world both buildings and landscape (Nur, 2009).

There Virtual World

In terms of utilizing online virtual worlds for language learning, many educationalists use *Second Life* to improve students' language skills (e.g. Chen, 2016; Wang, 2017). This paper presents another kind of virtual worlds named *There*. This virtual world requires lower internet bandwidth than *Second Life*. The 3D space is also easier to navigate. Additionally, the 3D characters (i.e. avatars) feature more than 100 facial expressions, such as sad, happy, and frowny face.



Fig. 1. *There* 3D Virtual Worlds

There 3D online virtual world, users can navigate the world by controlling their avatars. Like human in the real world, the avatar can walk and run, or drive a vehicle. In terms of doing conversation, the users can do both text-based chat or voice chat. Unfortunately, the voice chat required premium membership. Thus, the conversation activities only utilized text-based chat feature which was available for free.

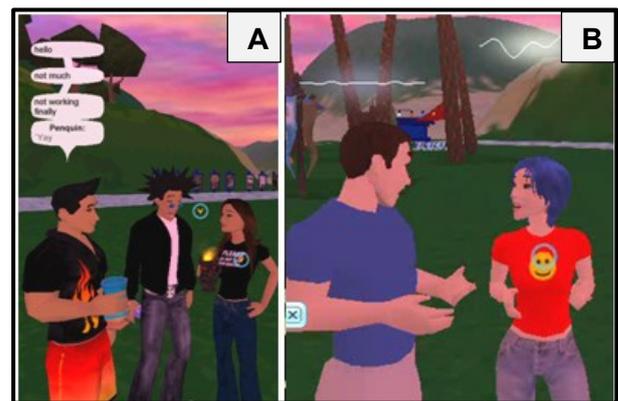


Fig. 2. Conversation using text-based chat (A) and by voice chat (B)

IV. THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to evaluate students' English conversational practices through text-based chat, which covered content of their written communication. In this study, the students interacted and communicated, in English, with other virtual world users worldwide. Another objective of this study is EFL students' perception towards *there* as a platform for practicing English conversation.

Research Design

This research applied single-subject experimental with A-B-A design. It can be symbolized through the following way:



Fig. 3. Single subject experimental, A-B-A design (Gay, 2006)

According to Gay (2006), single-subject experimental designs are designs that can be applied when sample size is one or when a number of individuals are considered as one group. Basically, the participant is exposed to a non-treatment and a treatment phase. The non-treatment condition is symbolized as A and the treatment condition is symbolized as B. Gay explains that, in A-B-A design, baseline measurements are repeatedly made until stability is established, treatment is introduced, a number of measurements are made, and the treatment phases is followed by a second baseline phase. If the measurement is better during the treatment phase than during either baseline phase, the effectiveness of the treatment has been demonstrated.

Participants

In this study, the participants were 2 (two) students from Department of English Education, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. During the data collection, these students were in their second year of pre-service English teachers, and would started internship as teachers in the

next few months. Thus, they would have alternative platform for improving English communication skill.

In technical requirement, the students who participated in this research must possess laptop with at least 1 Giga Byte (GB) of Random Access Memory (RAM), Microsoft Windows XP, DirectX 8.1, 3D accelerated video card with 64MB, and the latest drivers and Internet Explorer 6.0. This is because the online 3D virtual world contains 3D graphic resolution which required specification of technology devices, mentioned above. From this consideration, only few students were qualified to participate in the study.

Procedure of Collecting Data

Before performing treatment, baseline phase A1 tests were repeatedly conducted. In the baseline phase A1, the researchers gave written communication tests. According to Manohar (2008), written communication can be either via snail mail, or email. The effectiveness of written communication depends on the style of writing, vocabulary used, grammar, clarity and precision of language.

After undertaking baseline phase A1, treatment phase (B) was conducted for 4 (four) times. Each treatment lasted one and a half hour per meeting. During the treatment, the participants interacted and communicated with other virtual world users from various countries through *There* virtual world. In order to evaluate the students’ written communication during the treatment phase, the students’ chat histories were collected from each student’s computer hard disk.

After the treatment phase, the measurements were made repeatedly (A2) by giving them similar written communication tests. Besides conducting tests and treatment, interview was also done to gather information about the students’ perception towards *There* virtual world as tool for practicing English conversation.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by: (1) scoring the students’ test results; (2) tabulating the students’ scores; (3) classifying the student’ scores; (4) calculating the mean score of the students’ scores by using Microsoft Excel computer program; (5) Presenting the mean scores by using visual inspection of the graphic.

In analysing students’ English written communication, the researchers used analytic scoring rubric. As shown in Tables I, the scoring rubrics focused on the content.

TABLE I: ANALYTIC SCORING RUBRICS FOR CONTENT OF ENGLISH WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Content		
Score	Range	Indicators
A (9-10)	Very Good	- The ideas are clearly stated - The ideas are comprehensible - The ideas are relevant - The ideas fluently expressed
B (7-8)	Good	- The ideas are clearly stated - The ideas are quite comprehensible - The ideas are adequate relevant - The ideas adequately expressed
C (5-6)	Average	- The ideas are rather clearly stated - The ideas are quite comprehensible - The ideas are quite relevant - The ideas sufficiently expressed
D (3-4)	Poor	- The ideas are not clearly stated - The ideas are quite incomprehensible - The ideas are not quite relevant - The ideas non fluent expressed
E (1-2)	Very Poor	- The ideas are not enough to evaluate - The ideas are incomprehensible - No communication of ideas - The ideas are irrelevant

Adapted from Salija (2004)

V. FINDINGS

Students’ English Conversation Prctatice in Written Form

The data collected through written tests and documentation study from the students’ chat history. In the A-B-A type for single-subject experimental procedure, the measurement of students’ written communication has been done repeatedly to obtain a clear pattern from their scores. This pattern is known as baseline phase for measurement before treatment (A1), after treatment (A2) and during the treatment (B). The students’ scores are presented in graphs.

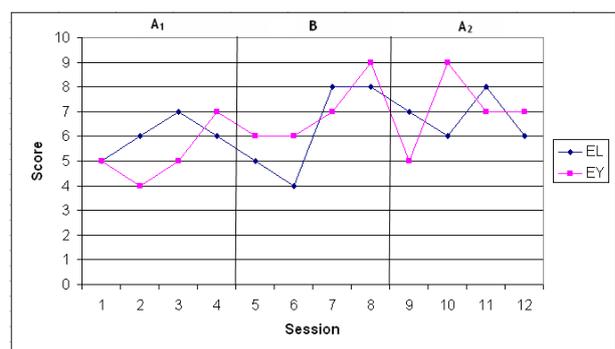


Fig. 4. Student’s scores in English content

As we can see on fig.4 above, the baseline of student A (EL) shows that, there was a stable baseline of A1 with a score 6, range 5 to 7 with a mean 6. A2 shows similar score, range 6 to 8 with a mean 6,75. Whereas during the treatment phase, the range was 4 to 8 with a mean 6,25. It indicates that the content development for EL’s written communication increased 0.75 point.

For student B (EY), the baseline in A1 was 5, range 4 to 7 with a mean 5,25. A2 was 7, range 5 to 8 with a mean 7.

Whereas during the treatment phase, the range was 6 to 9 with a mean 7. It shows that the content development for for EY's written communication increased 1,75 point.

EFL Students' Perception towards There as A Platform For Practicing English Conversation

Both students A and B are interested using 3D virtual world for practicing English conversation. They perceived that 3D virtual world is a proper platform to promote English conversation because most users come from other countries such as United States, Australia, and United Kingdom. The users in this virtual world use English to communicate each other. Student A reported that practicing conversation in 3D virtual world similar to having conversation with a real person, because while chatting she would hang out and explore the virtual world. However, the student would suggest that the real user's face/picture should be attached in the avatar, so that she can see how the real user looks like.

For learner B, the online virtual world was a new thing for her because commonly, she did conventional chat using *Skype* or *Facebook*. Besides chatting, she could move/control the avatar such as walking, running, flying, and driving vehicle like playing games. In *There*, she met new friends from other countries with various languages and cultures. She would talk about general to personal things, such as asking about daily activities and academic assignments. She acknowledged that she had new idea for her undergraduate thesis after having conversation with another user. Unfortunately, as learner B reported, some people were impolite and rude, such as ignoring her when said 'Hi' or asked to have a conversation.

Overall, 3D online virtual world is a good platform for both students. Through this platform, they can simply find English native speakers and practice English conversation more easily. They admitted that they can enrich their English vocabularies. There were several new English terms the students learned throughout the conversation. Unfortunately, internet connection sometimes low. They reported that they have to wait for about 15 minutes to log in, which, in turn, hampered them to practice English conversation with other users.

VI. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

Broadly speaking, technology plays an important role in creating authentic second/foreign language environments (e.g. Romaña Correa, 2015; Thorne, 2005), particularly in EFL context. Online communication tools such as email, social networks, and messengers are commonly used to communicate with other people in a distance (Nur, 2010). This paper presents 3D virtual world as an alternative online platform to practice English conversation in written form.

Based on the findings of this study, text-based chat through online 3D virtual world improved the students' English communication content. It also enriched vocabulary due to amount of new English terms that students found during treatment.

Additionally, as what has been discussed earlier, this platform has more features than others online communication platforms such as *Facebook* or *Skype*. Unlike *Facebook* and *Skype*, where users need to get approval to connect with other users, 3D virtual world allows users to start conversation by merely approaching other users via avatars. This is because 3D virtual world mimics a real world environment. In this regard, by controlling their avatars, users can navigate the 3D space just like in a real world situation such as walking and approaching someone to talk to.

Since the advent of conversational approaches to second/foreign language pedagogy, communication has been accentuated not only as an indispensable process but also as a goal of second/foreign language education (Fallah, 2014). However, if the lack of a target language environment is considered as a problem, then it may results to a lack of involvement in real-life situations (Al Hosni, 2014). Fortunately, our new life is highly affected by the era of information and communication technology (Hwang, Huang, Shadiev, Wu, & Chen, 2014), as the potential solution to promote English conversation for EFL learners.

In this regards, through online 3D virtual world, users can directly start conversation with other users by approaching and saying 'Hi' to them. Moreover, users are less likely to feel hesitate or afraid from being rejected. This is why 3D virtual world is a substantial alternative for EFL students, as they commonly encounter problems to practice English conversation in a real context.

VII. LIMITATION, CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study has revealed that practicing English conversation in an online 3D virtual world can improve English communication content. Through this virtual world, students can also learn new English vocabularies. In addition, as acknowledged by the students, this virtual world was an interesting platform for practicing English conversation, as they can easily find English native speakers to chat with.

Unfortunately, with the low internet connection speed, the students sometimes found difficulties to stay online. This is because, unlike common website that only show page by page, this virtual world display 3D spaces that should be navigated through avatar. It is also very unfortunate that the activities did not include voice chat feature. Instead, the students only used the text-based chat. Thus, further studies should explore English languages practices using the voice chat to examine the effectiveness of using the feature.

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