Avatar Kinect: Drama in the Virtual Classroom Among L2 Learners of English

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Use of online technology for social interaction and entertainment has become ubiquitous amongst young adults around the world. Research in these areas has investigated a multitude of areas including user identity (Boyd, 2006), interpersonal connection (Light et al., 2012), privacy (Larsen, 2007), and social presence (Chi-Hsuing, 2001). This study presents a qualitative approach to exploring classroom behaviour using dramaturgical analysis of student interactions in relation with, and as mediated through, Avatar Kinect, a gesture-based gaming software among L2 learners of English at two international branch campuses in the Arabian Gulf where face-to-face interactions between unrelated members of the opposite sex are generally discouraged. Avatar Kinect was explored as potential learning platform that might provide a safe way for young males and females to interact while discussing social issues in a first-year university composition course. Data was collected through personal observation and survey. Methodologically, the present study applied a qualitative dramaturgical analysis to a language learning environment supported by online role-play, an approach that appears to be relatively rare in the literature (cf. Vangsnes et al., 2012). The study yielded several key findings. First, it demonstrated the value and applicability of dramaturgical analysis as an effective qualitative analytic method for gaining insight and understanding regarding learning behaviours of students in higher education. Specifically, it showed that dramaturgical analysis can enable researchers to uncover motivations and perceptions related with personality and cultural sub-contexts for non-native English speakers in the Arab Gulf. Next, the study showed that socially outgoing participants were able to successfully debate social topics front stage line while more introverted participants remained back stage yet still interacted through prompting their more extroverted peers. Third, it also confirmed earlier studies that online participants tend to select avatars that represent their own gender and racial appearance (Hankerson et al., 2016; Robertson, Magdy & Goldwater, 2018), suggesting that social media software programmers should try to foster more inclusive and diverse representational options for their intended end users. Another important finding was that Avatar Kinect offered a new and dynamic way for students to engage with their instructor and their peers in the learning process so long as technological issues were kept to a minimum. Indeed, because of numerous technological disruptions that occurred during the Avatar Kinect-mediated lesson, the study highlighted the great importance of rigorous testing and re-testing of virtual platforms prior to deploying them as a part of any learning environment. In this regard, in order to achieve maximum utility, it is clear that institutional support and flexibility around IT policy must be secured before network-based virtual platforms can be effectively implemented for learning within a given educational institution. On a positive note, advances in technology may soon make these glitches a thing of the past.

Keywords: Gesture-based Learning. ESL/EFL. Drama. Virtual. Avatar. Middle East.
References

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