Speech Acts in a Virtual World:
Design and Implementation

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Abstract. In the first half of the twentieth century, notions such as linguistic structures and student's linguistic capacity were the traditional elements of any language teaching. These notions are yielding their place to the functional use of language and how language is being shaped by the different communicative situations. This communicative approach of teaching a foreign language has led the redefinition of learning objectives and general principles of the teaching act. The emphasis is on student's communicative ability, therefore communication plays a key role in teaching Language - Civilisation. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), we find the key notion of speech acts. The interest in this project is the relationship between traditional speech acts and simulated situations in Virtual Worlds. Furthermore, there is an interest in finding out if it is possible to develop learner's language skills by teaching and using speech acts in these environments. In the above context, in this paper we first illustrate current needs in teaching and learning second languages, then we discuss the design of a Virtual world and finally its implementation for teaching speech acts of French language in higher education.

Keywords: language teaching and learning, speech acts, virtual worlds, higher education.

1. Introduction

The effort of teaching a foreign language through language, culture and civilisation of others still occupies all those involved in the linguistic educational process. In recent decades, the main principles of second language teaching focus on

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teaching language and culture as a whole, with a great concern about the means of communication in specific socially-based situations.

In the first half of the twentieth century, notions such as linguistic structures and student's linguistic capacity were the traditional elements of any language teaching. With the significant contribution of Halliday (1978) and Hymes (1984), these notions are yielding their place to the functional use of language and how language is being shaped by the different communicative situations. This new communicative approach of teaching a foreign language has led to the redefinition of learning objectives and general principles of the teaching act. The emphasis is on student's communicative ability. Therefore, communication plays a key role in teaching Language - Civilisation. Simultaneously, with discourse analysis, it becomes clear that communication is accomplished through written and oral texts. From these texts, linguistic elements derive their significance and meaning; consequently, linguistic elements can not be considered as isolated teaching objectives, but as functional communication structures and conventions inextricably linked with text types.

Furthermore, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has widely spread in second language learning and teaching environments. Learners are now interacting with a variety of semiotic modes through image, video, sound, and new forms of written and spoken texts in a complex multilingual communicative universe.

2.   Speech acts

Speech acts are the core of teaching. Around them, curricula and author textbooks are articulated and they are in perfect relation and connection with both communicative situations and textual genres. It should be noted that genres offer the most appropriate medium for the cultivation of linguistic and metalinguistic skills, including awareness of the relationship between the structural and social aspects of language (Halliday & Hasan, 1991).

Speech acts were primarily detected in the "communicative approach" to teaching foreign language in 1970, an approach which has brought radical changes in the methodology of teaching a foreign language. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, which is widely adopted and accepted as the European standard for teaching and learning foreign languages, we find again the key notion of speech acts. Speech acts are at the heart of teaching and the core development of communicative language skills in the

sense that they describe what learners can do with language in specific contexts or in a particular communicative situation (Council of Europe, 2001).

According to CEFR, learner's communicative language competence is activated in the performance of the various language activities involving reception, production, interaction or mediation (interpretation or translation). Each of these types of activity is possible in relation to texts in oral or written form, or both.

3.   Virtual worlds

In an era of "digital globalization", the increasing use of open technological platforms, such as CMC, VLS, LCMS, Blogs, Wikis, social networking sites, and online gaming platforms and simulation environments, affect the entire adulthood of young learners. A whole new generation – often described by researchers with terms such as "Net generation" (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), "new millennium learners" (OECD, 2008), or "digital natives" (McLester, 2007; Prensky, 2001) – lives, entertains and gets educated by digital technologies and media. In this web generation (2.0), users are no longer simple consumers of the information provided by the websites' administrators, but are now in a position to participate, communicate and cooperate with other users, as well as to create and publish any type of multimedia information and create new content or even their own personal websites.

Virtual Worlds are 3-Dimensional MUVEs (Multi-User Virtual Environments) in which users can move and interact with each other. Virtual Worlds can be simple or very complex environments that simulate specific sites and locations from rooms or buildings, to entire cities or islands. Today's concept of "virtual world" refers to a type of online community that is implemented using a computer simulated 3D environment in which users can interact with each other with audio and text and use or create objects in it (Miah & Jones, 2011). Nowadays, a growing number of virtual environments and worlds are available to users (Bainbridge, Lutters, Rhoten, & Lowood, 2010).

In the case of foreign language learning, a key challenge for the foreign language teacher has always been the design of a learning environment that brings learners close to the natural environment and the native speakers of the target language. For the purposes of our study, learning scenarios are especially developed and designed with French as the main reference language. The scenarios aim at the development of communicative language skills and are based in speech acts, which are associated with the levels of language proficiency, as defined by the CEFR.

4. Conclusions

In order to design, develop and schedule training scenarios for communicative language education and training of learners in virtual worlds, a teacher must take into account the kind of experiences that are expected to occur to the users/learners, such as partial immersion in a social interaction, participation, and collaboration with someone for a purpose. Furthermore, we propose to take into account specific speech acts for the development of communicative language skills.

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