Class of the future

Language learners can now meet up with native speakers in their home country, without leaving their computers. **Vance Stevens** *enters the virtual world of Second Life*

I'm a digital immigrant with a lifelong interest in learning languages, in spite of my early schooling, not because of it. I learnt my first foreign languages in an era before institutions had computers, when there were few opportunities to meet native speakers. Methodologies relied heavily on grammar and translation, and were rarely communicative or constructivist. Now I'm studying Arabic with teachers from my generation whose techniques have hardly changed since those dark ages. There must be a better way. But enough about first life.

Reboot. Teleport! Where am I? This doesn't look like home. Could it be Morocco? Egypt? It certainly looks like a Middle Eastern country, complete with souk and Islamic architecture. There are some people over there. Maybe I'll go and have a word with them. Perhaps they speak Arabic.

I have just entered Second Life, a 3D multi-user virtual environment, accessible for free via your computer. Users design and create elaborate simulations of real life on server space purchased from Linden Labs, which employs 200 people to manage the technical aspects. Since it was launched in 2003, millions of people have created avatars (virtual representations of themselves) in Second Life.

Text chat has long worked there in a number of languages, and you can even wear a HUD ("heads-up-display") called Babbler, which enables you to type in one language while others read your words in another. Many languages are now spoken "inworld" as well, via computer microphones and speakers. Immersion in a foreign culture, complete with an authentic linguistic environment, is now within reach of anyone with a sufficiently robust computer and internet connection.

An authentic linguistic environment is within reach of anyone with a sufficiently robust computer

Although Second Life (SL) offers such opportunities for free, it is also a booming field for business. Millions of dollars change hands there daily, as "residents" purchase virtual property, hire scripting services, and sell virtual artefacts, such as clothing (although much apparel is free, people try to outdo each other in dressing up their avatars). However, it is also a place for altruism, information dissemination and sharing, and networking.

Many individuals and institutions involved in education have presences there. According to Australian educator-consultant Jo Kay (avatar name Jokay Wollongong),[1] more than 150 educational institutions are listed in the Simteach Second Life Education Wiki.[2] Her own world, Jokaydia, was used for a film at the EduCon 2.0 conference held recently online and in Philadelphia.[3] Konrad Glogowski, known as Konrad March inworld, researches 8th-grade student bloggers and has long espoused the idea of classrooms becoming "third places" (ie areas conducive to informal learning).[4] It is easy to see how Second Life could be a place where participants from all walks of life "hang out", network and help each other to become adept at a mutually-functional level.

Edunation is an island established by Consultants-E and its founder Gavin Dudeny (avatar Dudeney Ge). It provides space to Graham Stanley, who is associated inworld with his work on the Teen Grid, a space for young people to safely enjoy the educational benefits of Second Life without risking exposure to its more unseemly aspects.[5]

Edunation is also home to StudyCom (Study.com), whose volunteer teachers provide free lessons in English, Chinese and Spanish. Dave Winet started StudyCom long before his alter ego, David Delling, began teaching in Second Life. He uses Edunation for short grammar lessons and then sends students elsewhere in Second Life to interview other residents and engage in role-play. They might, for example, explore ancient Rome and Athens while pretending to be soldiers or philosophers – in authentic costume.

Winet appreciates "the beauty and wonder" of SL, which "becomes an irresistible focus for ESL [English as a second language] learning, in spite of the considerable technical hurdles," such as demands on bandwidth and system resources. StudyCom and other

OUT OF THIS WORLD:
Webhead Link (Vance's virtual persona) talks to Daffodil Fargis in 'Morocco' (l); and meets a guide, language school founder and tutor in front of a notice board inworld (far l)

inworld language schools, such as Second Life English (SLE, www.secondlifeenglish.com/news.php), put teachers and students in touch with one another. Founded by Kip Boahn, a language teacher living in Germany, SLE provides free workshops and seminars, ESL/SL orientation, inworld quizzing tools, "launch pad classrooms" and integration with an open source learning management system. Team teaching and "collaborative exploration" are encouraged, and teachers and "buddies" wishing to participate in language exchanges, hire out their services or help others to learn a language for free, can place notices on a wall in the virtual world. As in real life, language learners can choose to access resources for self-teaching or streamline the process through paid tuition.

Languagelab (www.languagelab.com) is the first serious language school to establish more than a mere presence in Second Life.[6] It has just launched its English courses commercially, and Spanish is due to follow shortly. Its director of education, Paul Sweeney (aka Head Teacher), says both teachers and students are drawn to the programme because of a desire to work or learn from home. He sees it as healthy that the technology appears to be only secondary in helping people to pursue their language-learning objectives.

To visit Languagelab or any other world, type its name into a search box in Second Life, and then "teleport" in. At Languagelab, you will be greeted by someone like Jane Zhaoying, a Languagelab employee who says she's Dutch. She conducts us to a courtyard where students participate in team quiz events. As a conversation starter for a nicely

constructivist language activity, she shows us pictures in a gallery created by students.

Sweeney takes me on a tour of "the city". You have to be either a student customer, member of staff or invited guest to access this area, but once there I can wander at will into the amazing structures that have been created as simulation spaces for language learning. At the airport, I stroll through the security gate and board a plane. Although it does not take off, my avatar can fly, so I cruise above the tall buildings and end up at the hotel.

I fly to the coffee shop and find Lane inside, an engaging character actor who keeps strictly to her role

I am sliding down the water chutes at the pool when I receive notes from inworld that Millie Eames is opening the coffee shop and Lane Jarman, roving reporter, is somewhere in the streets nearby. I fly to the coffee shop and find Lane inside having coffee. Millie and Lane are two engaging character actors employed by Languagelab. They keep strictly to their roles as they talk to one another, being sure to include me in the conversation.

Nicka Okelly, a bonafide student from Spain, soon appears. When I ask what the courses are like, she mentions conventional lessons and homework but clearly appreciates having the run of a safe environment where she can converse with passersby in the target language. Jane invites me to visit the printing presses, which simulate how real newspapers are printed. What an interesting environment for language study, I think.

One unique aspect to Languagelab is its teacher-training programme, which aims to make teachers experts at navigating and

GETTING STARTED

Second Life is for virtually anybody, so how can you participate? As long as you have a computer with reasonably robust resources and graphics, and decent bandwidth, you can download and install the software from www.secondlife.com. To get started, you have to choose an appearance for your avatar and give it a name. You'll also find a "Help" pull-down, with various options including a link to the Second Life blog (blog.secondlife.com).

Try visiting the places mentioned in this article and ask people you meet for help. One way to find people is to pull up a mini-map and look for green dots, which represent other avatars. Making friends is key to a successful start, so "Offer Friendship" liberally, and each time you go "inworld", check your "friends list", which shows who's online. You can chat as you would with any instant messaging programme (eg SMS Messenger), or teleport to where they are, which takes you to a new learning environment.

GOING INWORLD:
A teacher with Avatar Languages logs in to Second Life. Language learners can practise their speaking and listening skills by talking to native speakers and tutors via their headsets

using tools in SL. Languagelab have just matriculated their first batch of trained teachers, among them Daf Smirnov (real name Dafne Gonzalez), who is well known in real and virtual communities of educators for her innovative teaching practices. She has now teamed up with SL builders and other teachers to develop course materials for Languagelab in Spanish. Teacher training currently covers personal skills, communication skills in SL, the basics of building and scripting, SL tools and uploading sounds and textures.

If there was any doubt that this way of learning languages is growing, SLanguages 2008, held in May, was proof enough. Launched last year, the annual conference has grown beyond expectations. There's much more to learn about Second Life, but the best way is to go there and see for yourself.

GLOSSARY

Avatar: a graphical/digital image that represents a person, as on the internet.

HUD (heads-up display): a transparent display that presents data onscreen without obstructing the user's view.

Learning management system: software tools designed to manage user access, such as self-registration on instructor-led training, online learning and assessment, and application sharing.

Notes
1 Recent interview, Second Life Cable Network, slcn.tv/tonight-live-paisley-beebe-17feb08
2 See www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki. For a comprehensive analysis of education in SL, see Alja Sulcic, *An Introduction to Virtual Worlds*, 2007, www.slideshare.net/ialja/virtual-worlds-introduction-second-life-and-beyond; Vance Stevens, "Second Life in Education and Language Learning" in *TESL-EJ*, 2006, vol 10, no 3, www.tesl-ej.org/ej39/int.html; Vance Stevens, "Second Life and Online Collaboration through Peer-to-Peer Distributed Learning Networks" in S M Stewart et al (ed), *Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference for Middle East Teachers of Science, Mathematics and Computing*, 2007, METSMaC, Abu Dhabi, pp.295-307, www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/papers/metsmac/Stevens-METSMaC-2007.pdf
3 Konrad Glogowski, "EduCon 2.0 in Second Life", 2008, blip.tv/file/608699
4 Coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, "third places" usually refers to clubs and recreation areas. First and second places are home and work. Konrad Glogowski, *Classrooms as Third Places*, internet archive, www.archive.org/details/KonradGlogowski-ClassroomsAsThirdPlaces
5 Graham Stanley, "Tales of Mystery and Imagination: Teenager Learners and Second Life", 2008, presentation at TESOL-Spain, tesol-spain.wikispaces.com
6 Michael Erard, "A Boon to Second Life Language Schools" in *Technology Review*, 10 April 2007, www.technologyreview.com/Infotech/18510/ page1/?a=f

How to learn… Chinese

Mandarin is an ancient and venerable language, so it's had time to smooth out the rough bits. It has discarded such baggage as tense, case, mood, number, person, gender and voice. By comparison, Greek has seven tenses, five cases, five moods, three numbers, three persons, three genders and three voices.

Pronunciation
You've heard that Chinese is a tonal language, but it only has five tones compared to Cantonese's eight. All languages have tones!

Basic grammar
Each sentence has a subject followed by verb and object, so *John* 有烤鸭 (*John yǒu kǎoyā*) = "John has roast duck".

Reading and writing
English has 26 characters, most speakers recognise 3,000 written words and can sound out the remaining 37,000. In Chinese, there is no alphabet and no need to sound things out. Just learn 3,000 of the most common 汉字 (*hànzì* = "characters") and a few combinations to attain a vocabulary of about 17,000 words.

Intermediate grammar
"John has a roast duck", "John has the roast ducks" and "the roast duck is wanted by John" take the same form.

Advanced grammar
Learn five particles: *ma, ba, guo, le* and *la*, and place them at the end of sentences, except for *guo* which must appear after the verb. *Ma* is the "yes/no" question particle: John 有烤鸭吗 (*John yǒu kǎoyā ma?*) = "John have roast duck, yes/no?" *Ba* is best described as the Estuary English "innit" particle: John 有烤鸭吧 (*John yǒu kǎoyā ba?*) = "John have roast duck, innit?" (or "shall John have roast duck?"). *Guo* is the "ever-had" particle: John 有过烤鸭 (*John yǒu guo kǎoyā*) = "John once had roast duck". *Le* could be called the "dunnit" particle: John 有烤鸭了 (*John yǒu kǎoyā le*) = "John had roast duck". *La* is the "just joking" particle: John 很白痴 有烤鸭啦 (*John hěn báichī yǒu kǎoyā, la*) = "John's an idiot to have roast duck, just joking".

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Michael Mainelli
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For the full article, see www.zyen.com/Fun/Humour/Learn_Chinese_In_An_Afternoon.htm.

Next issue: How to learn… Irish.

United we stand

By promoting collaboration between education providers, the National Network for Translation is securing the future of the profession, says **Myriam Salama-Carr**

The National Network for Translation (NNT) is a key strand of the Routes into Languages initiative,[1] which aims to promote language study and language-related careers, and develop the role of languages as a "motor of civic and economic regeneration". Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the scheme was launched in 2006, following the Roberts Review into Strategic and Vulnerable Subjects.

Led by the University of Salford in partnership with the universities of Aston, Heriot-Watt, Portsmouth, Westminster and Bath, the NNT was established in February, in response to Lord Dearing's report. This partnership enables it to draw on a strong portfolio of courses in translation, a wide range of languages and specialisms, an established research record in translation studies, experience in managing training projects, and links with the translation profession.

The group is well placed to identify current trends and the future needs of the translation profession. It has links with leading language service providers and employers, and national and international groups such as the IoL and Institute for Translation and Interpreting (ITI).

The NNT aims to address the shortage of first-language English translators and interpreters, the concentration on Western European languages in Higher Education, the low profile of translation careers, and the need to develop stronger cooperation between course providers and potential employers.

To fulfill this mission, it has set up – and intends to extend – a programme of career talks with input from translation graduates, high-profile professionals and employers to reflect the diversity of translation and translation-related work, and thus promote

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ROUTES INTO LANGUAGE: *West Midlands pupils on an intensive Mandarin and Japanese course at Birmingham University*

entry to the profession. A series of career talks and events has already been scheduled across the country to inspire young people to take up languages, to give them an insight into the profession, and to promote translation as an attractive and challenging profession. The response has been overwhelmingly positive.

The NNT partners are also developing material to promote the training of translators in a wider range of languages. The module templates will take into account the possibility of a lower degree of language competence and knowledge of the source culture, and will be trialled within certain institutions. Emphasis will be placed on the sharing of good practice between institutions through events focusing on the training of translation teachers.

NNT events have included Careers in Languages days for schools, and translation-themed workshops for undergraduate and graduate students considering careers in the language industry, as well as for students on non-traditional language or literature degrees who may be able to develop their linguistic

skills to become translators. These range from talks by literary translators to workshops on localisation and audiovisual translation.

There is considerable support and interest in this initiative within the secondary and higher education sectors, and the NNT also looks to professional associations for support, aiming to tap into existing expertise and provision.

Over the next two years, the NNT will roll out its programme of promotional activities and training materials, and liaise with the Graduate Apprenticeship Scheme to promote the implementation of translation placement schemes. Routes into Languages is providing the support needed to take the NNT forward in a more strategic way and to bring together all stakeholders.[2] For more information on the NNT and details of its events see www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/translation.

Notes
1 "Routes into Languages, will run for four years from 2006-07 to 2009-10. It will be funded via our Strategic Development Fund (SDF) and led by the UK Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) in partnership with the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and CiLT, the National Centre for Languages," see www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/mfl/routes.htm.
2 As noted by Teresa Tinsley, director of communications at CiLT: "Never before have so many partners been involved in promoting languages in such a sustained way," Routes into Languages Newsletter, issue 1, spring 2008.

TL | **Professor Myriam Salama-Carr is programme director of the NNT at the University of Salford.**