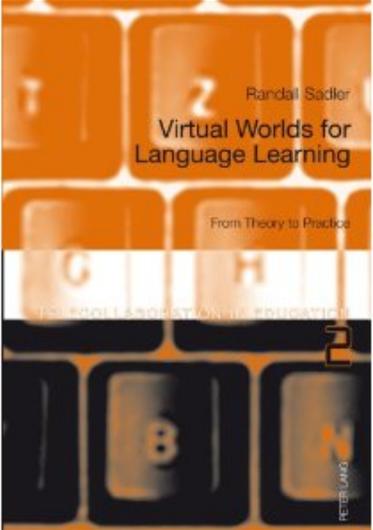


## REVIEW OF *VIRTUAL WORLDS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE*

<p><b>Virtual Worlds for Language Learning: From Theory to Practice</b></p> <p>Randall Sadler</p> <p>2012</p> <p>ISBN: 978-3034305730</p> <p>US \$57.95</p> <p>174 pp.</p> <p>Peter Lang</p> <p>New York</p>	
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### Review by [D. Joseph Cunningham, Georgetown University](#)

Randall Sadler's *Virtual Worlds for Language Learning: From Theory to Practice* is the second of three volumes in the Telecollaboration in Education series published by Peter Lang. The aim of the series is to highlight the pedagogical processes and outcomes of engaging language learners who, while geographically distant from one another, seek to collaborate on various activities, tasks and projects through the use of online communication tools. This 174-page volume focuses on an area of emerging interest for telecollaboration and foreign language education: the potential of Virtual Worlds (VWs) to foster foreign language-based interaction and exchange. Linking theory and practice, and written in a humorous style, the text essentially functions as a handbook for language educators and language learners interested in exploring these new digital landscapes and identifying the many opportunities for language practice housed within.

The book is organized into two main sections, each consisting of three chapters. Each chapter is followed by a concise list of print and electronic resources for the reader's further inquiry. Section 1 (chapters 1–3) provides an overview of VWs and explores the theoretical rationale for using them in language learning and telecollaborative exchange, while section 2 (chapters 4–6) explores the pedagogical applications of VWs, particularly as connected to the VW most often used for educational purposes: *Second Life* (SL). In chapter 1 the author gives a brief introduction of the topics covered in the book, before moving onto an overview and history of VWs in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 focuses on the intersection of education and VWs, thereby grounding this innovative pedagogical approach on theoretical foundations. Chapter 4 presents the results of an in-depth survey of how languages are being learned and used in SL. The various learning environments (both formal and informal) of SL form the basis for chapter 5. The final chapter of the book looks forward by identifying potential research avenues, as well as by offering predictions for the future of VWs and foreign language education.

Chapter 1 begins by reminding the reader that the concept of VWs has long existed as a staple of science fiction; however, only in the last decade or so has this fiction become fact. Technological developments have now made it possible to render realistic three-dimensional environments in which users can interact with one another and with their surroundings. In addition to SL, other popular VWs include *World of*

*Warcraft*, *Habbo*, *Active Worlds*, *Club Penguin*, etc. While these VWs all exist as social environments, they have been created with different audiences in mind, and the activities (and resultant language production) of the various VWs reflect these distinct audiences. In the same vein, the book itself is targeted at a diverse readership. Language teachers interested in using VWs as part of their instruction will find an in-depth treatment of the topic, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. The book is also appropriate for educating future language educators who want to know more about integrating technology into foreign language curricula. However, the text may be less useful for established researchers of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) due to a relative lack of empirical research. While chapter 4 (see below) reports on the results of a survey conducted about language use in SL, a more robust treatment of empirical data would be desirable.

In chapter 2, the author introduces and explains several key terms used throughout the book before tracing a brief history of the development of modern VWs. Today's myriad of VWs and similar programs can thank their existence to a robust digital infrastructure that provides reliable, high-speed networking capabilities. As Sadler explains, such was not the case when early programs such as PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations) came on the scene in the 1960s. Following in the next decade, networked text-based virtual environments (e.g., Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs) allowed users to interact with one another and navigate fantasy-themed worlds using a series of typed commands. The earliest incarnation of a modern VW, featuring a graphics-based interface akin to today's programs, was *Habitat*, released by Lucasfilm in 1986. Since that time, and as personal computers have grown exponentially more powerful, a veritable explosion in VWs has occurred. While a complete discussion of every VW is not possible, the author presents an overview of several popular environments, including commercially-developed games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) and more loosely structured social platforms (e.g., SL), noting both the intended audiences and potential costs for each of the VWs discussed.

In order to make the case for the pedagogical application of VWs, Sadler focuses chapter 3 on an examination of four relevant learning theories. He begins with John Dewey's idea of experiential learning, which holds that any *situation* (i.e., the environment in which an interaction takes place) may stimulate learning, especially those occurring in environments beyond the "brick and mortar" of the traditional classroom. In this regard, Sadler suggests that VWs "provide a key linking component between Experiential Education and Telecollaboration in that a VW can provide that shared situation for the learners...even if their corporeal selves are located many miles apart" (p. 60). Sadler also reviews the work of Lev Vygotsky, whose insights form the basis for sociocultural approaches to language pedagogy and research. In this regard, the Zone of Proximal Development exists in a space shared between telecollaborators, wherein the collective knowledge of the partners stimulates more advanced language production than would be possible otherwise. Sadler then turns to David Kolb, an author who is heavily influenced by Dewey's work and who views experiential learning as a process occurring between the learner and the environment; however, in the 4-stage model developed by Kolb, learning follows a cyclical process that results in observation of and reflection about a particular experience, thereby enabling the formation of generalizations that can be tested out during the next cycle of concrete experiences. In the context of VWs, this theory could apply to any number of interactions in which a learner observes the language or behavior of an interlocutor (e.g., the use of terms related to building something), leading him or her to postulate generalizations that can be tested out in a similar such encounter in the future. The last theory Sadler discusses is Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis, which stipulates that a precondition of successful second language learning is the presence of comprehensible input, and that input can be made more comprehensible through interaction and attendant language negotiation. As noted by the author, the upshot for language learning in VWs is that pedagogical tasks must be situated in an environment where the right type of input is likely to occur and where language negotiation can be conducted meaningfully. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of previous

research conducted on CMC and VWs. At present, most research on the effect of VWs on learning has been conducted from a general educational perspective, and there is a relative paucity of empirical studies related specifically to language and language acquisition in VWs.

To help remediate the current lack of empirical second language acquisition research in VWs, Sadler devotes chapter 4 of the book to an in-depth exploration of the languages being used and learned in the popular VW *Second Life*. Noting that it is difficult to say with accuracy just how many users of SL maintain an active profile, Sadler instead tallies the total number of user hours spent in SL during a particular time frame. In the third quarter (July-September) of 2009, users spent approximately 118 million hours in SL. These users originated from over 30 countries, with the United States alone accounting for nearly 40% of the total user hours logged. Based on these figures, Sadler indicates that individuals from countries representing over 20 unique languages logged into SL during the time studied. About half of SL users originated from English-speaking countries, followed by countries where German (9.5%), French (5.8%), Portuguese (5.8%), and many other languages are spoken. While such information provides a starting point, it does not actually reflect what language(s) are being used in SL, how they are being used, or by whom. In order to shed light on these questions, Sadler conducted a survey at various random locations in SL<sup>1</sup> via his avatar, Randall Renoir, in order to find out about the language profile of SL users from the users themselves. The final data set was drawn from 237 completed surveys. Users first stated which language they used most often in real life. The vast majority of speakers came from European language backgrounds (e.g., English, Spanish, Portuguese), with only 20 speakers coming from non-European language backgrounds (Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, and Turkish). When asked about how their real life language use differed from their SL language use, 54% of respondents reported either “usually” or “sometimes” using a different language in SL. When adding those who have *ever* used a language different than the real world language, this figure jumps to 78%. In the second part of the survey, Sadler asked about participants’ language learning experiences in SL. Nearly half of respondents indicated a positive effect on language development while using SL, with 12.2% reporting it helped “very much”, 14.3% reporting that it helped “some”, and 21.9% reporting that it helped “a little”. When asked about how this practice took place, the top three responses were listening to audio chat, joining a group that used the language, and reading text chat. Interestingly, the two choices that represented “formal” learning opportunities (i.e., attending a school or working with a tutor) were the least common practices for improving language in SL. As a whole, the survey showed that during the time period investigated most interaction in SL occurred in English, albeit by both speakers of English as a first language (L1) and English as a second language (L2). In addition, the survey revealed the great diversity of other languages being used and practiced in SL, affording students of these languages the opportunity to interact with L1 speakers of the target language.

Although not all SL users avail themselves of formal language instruction, chapter 5 details the growing number of educational institutions and language learning opportunities present in SL. The first group covered includes real life institutions that have a digital footprint in SL. A university’s existence in SL is often marked (and marketed) by means of a digital campus that features one or more iconic buildings tied to the real life campus. Faculty members of a particular institution may also have dedicated virtual space that they can use to hold office hours or work on independent projects. Simply by searching for the words “university” or “college”, Sadler was able to locate close to 600 higher educational institutions in SL, and this included only English-language results. In addition to the real life schools represented in SL, there are also schools that exist only as virtual constructs. Estimating the actual number of such schools is made more difficult due to the fact that their founders have often eschewed the label of ‘school’. Nevertheless, a prominent example of a SL language school is *LanguageLab*, comprising over 20 interconnected islands and designed to make use of a range of SL simulations to teach L2 English. Finally, in keeping with the educational theories discussed in chapter 3, Sadler mentions several options for experiential language learning in SL that can occur outside of formalized settings. More specifically, any location that caters to

interaction and socialization can serve as a platform for using and improving language in SL. For those interested in adding travel to their language learning agenda, a number of real world tourist destinations (e.g., the Eiffel Tower, Chichen Itza, etc.) have been replicated in SL. Although it is not guaranteed that visitors will be able to find first language-speaking interlocutors in these areas, the plurality of languages spoken at such sites does, to a certain extent, seem to reflect the nature of real world tourism. That it is possible to visit these attractions in SL reminds us of the fact that elaborate and realistic simulations are inherent to the landscape, and that such simulations can be harnessed for pedagogical gain. Sadler, for instance, provides a nice example of using a simulated marketplace to reinforce vocabulary and develop fluency in interactions related to shopping. Above all, interactions in such simulations need to be structured by appropriate tasks. In a very useful section of the book, Sadler describes in detail the task cycle related to the collaborative construction of objects in SL. Not only are learners guided to act and interact within the virtual environment while using the target language, the task ultimately results in reconstruction of a digital artifact that can be compared to the original and thereby functions as a built in low-stakes assessment. The collaborative building task serves as an example of best practices in bridging sound pedagogy with engaging digital play, and it should inspire creative language teachers to see the many ways that VWs can enrich their current instructional practices.

In wrapping up the book, Sadler casts a look into the future and offers a few comments regarding the outlook for VWs and language learning. Recognizing this domain as a new frontier in CALL/CMC research, Sadler suggests several directions for future research endeavors. First, initial efforts to research language use and learning in VWs have been primarily ethnographic and qualitative. While such explorations are valuable, they must also be complemented by quantitative investigations that point to more generalizable patterns and that lend themselves to replicability. Using such an approach, researchers can better understand how language learning in VWs compares to other types of CMC and/or real life language classrooms. Connected to this area are other questions related to language pedagogy in VWs. For example, is a particular teaching approach best suited to a virtual environment? How should students be evaluated in such an environment, if at all? Furthermore, a number of sociolinguistically-oriented research directions require additional investigation. For instance, the role of gender (and associated language production) in VWs is quite complex, and it bears investigating how users' gender identities do or do not correspond to real world gender roles. Next, given the multilingual environment presented by VWs such as SL, how does code switching take place? Finally, as VWs are inherently social platforms, how are various speech acts (e.g., requesting, promising, threatening, etc.) performed in these environments, and is their performance the same as or different from their enactments in the real world? Clearly the research agenda for VWs is wide open, with a number of interesting and important foci waiting to be investigated.

In sum, *Virtual Worlds for Language Learning: From Theory to Practice* provides a useful and detailed guide to conducting telecollaboration in VWs. Language educators who seek to engage their learners in these environments will be well served by the text's close connection between pedagogical theory and praxis. One limitation of the book, however, is perhaps best explained as a consequence of its subject matter: Sadler stands as one of few individuals pursuing applied linguistic research in VWs (see also Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012; Peterson, 2011; Thorne, 2008), and the text's treatment of current research efforts in this area is regrettably brief. As noted, Sadler calls for a broader investigation of VWs, and he identifies a number of potential targets in his concluding remarks. As the field matures, additional empirical research will be of critical import, and it is hoped that such efforts will eventually result in the publication of an edited collection of scholarly articles, similar to volumes 1 and 3 in the *Telecollaboration in Education* series.

**NOTE:**

1. Although an attempt was made to visit SL locations randomly, the data do not truly represent a randomized set due to the constraints the author faced (e.g., time zone differences) in the collection process.
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