# Putting the SL in ESL: Exploring immersive English education through Second Life

## Keywords

virtual reality, language school, Second Life, immersive, online community, e-commerce, esl vs. efl, three dimensional

This month, Iain Campbell dons his avatar alter ego and takes us on a tour of a language school within the virtual world of Second Life and interviews the school's visionary founder, Giovanni Tweak.

今月は、Iain Campbell がアバターを分身として、私達をセカンドライフ上のバーチャル語学学校へと誘い、創始者の Giovanni Tweak にインタビューをします。

MATERIALIZED on the floor of the lobby and looked around while I waited for my hat to appear on my head. It always seems to take a bit longer for my black derby to make the jump from one world to another. I suppose that's what I get for buying a cheap one. The building was a round cylindrical structure made of interlocking glass panels. There were a couple of chrome plated sofas off to one side, some class calendars that I could see updating before my eyes in front of me, and to my left, there was a reception desk beside which a man was standing. He was a tall, thin man in a tight black form fitting outfit. His hair was wildly spiked, like some sort of Japanese anime character.
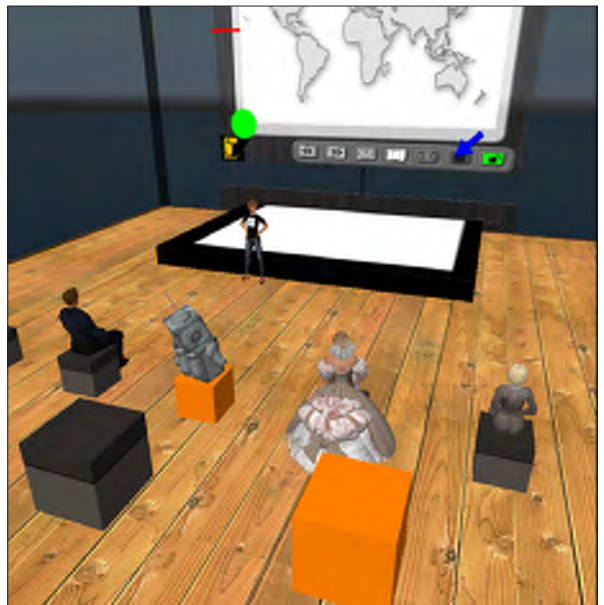


"Hello," his warm greeting appeared as text before my eyes. "The class is about to start. Would you like me to teleport you to the room?"

"No thank you," I respond, "I think I'll just fly up, if you don't mind."

Lifting off the ground, I soared up into the sky. I found the floating classroom after a short vertical ascent, and then landed near a seat where I settled down next to a girl in a pink sweater with a furry little creature on her shoulder. Our teacher, Daisy, sat on a box in the front of the class and informed us in a cool British accent that today we would be practicing reading and pronunciation while improving vocabulary. A beam of light was aimed at me and I was alerted the teacher wished to give me the reading. I accepted it, then in a flash, the reading text was hovering right in front of me. I had to marvel at what was taking place. People from all over the world were all seated together reading

sections of the text aloud and asking the teacher for clarification. This is, of course, a common scene in ESL classrooms around the world, but in this room, the classmate to my right was not a girl *from* France, but a girl *in* France. The man to my left was able to join us without ever leaving his living room in Turkey. The lesson progressed smoothly. All members were able to interact with the teacher and each other, and when time was up, everyone stood up, said their goodbyes, and vanished.

This whole scene may sound like science fiction, but with the proliferation of virtual online worlds, it is now a reality- well, a virtual reality anyway. All of this is taking place in the electronic three dimensional community known as Second Life (SL). It functions much like a video game, where a user interfaces with the program by controlling a character (or *avatar*) that can move about the environment and interact with various objects and people in the world. Most comparisons with a video game end there however, because users don't so much play the game as live in it along with some six million other residents. In this virtual world, they can build houses, host parties, sell goods, run businesses, chat with friends, and most importantly for language teachers, take classes.



## Interview

Now that SL's communication technologies have moved beyond the traditional text messaging into voice chat and video clip sharing, teachers have a number of tools at their finger tips to hold immersive language lessons in virtual reality. Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking with Giovanni Tweak, or so he calls his avatar. He is the owner of Drive-Through ESL, the school I visited. We met up in-world and had a chat about running a school in virtual reality.

**IC:** Hi, Giovanni. Thanks for taking the time to have a chat with me.

**GT:** Oh, it is my pleasure. You'll find that I like talking about ESL on SL a bit too much, I'm afraid.

**IC:** Great, then let me ask you a few questions about language learning in SL. When did you start up the school?

**GT:** I started the school in 2006 when SL was just three years old. In those days, SL only had text chatting for interaction and simply walking around was a processing problem for many computers. But, despite some of those challenges the school has grown, and since 2007 our schedule has increased from five regular classes a week to 15.

**IC:** Sounds like quite a line up. Can you tell me about some of those classes?

**GT:** Sure, we have a number of voice classes where students use a microphone and speakers to communicate. Voice classes include Beginning English and Business English for Beginners. There are five different reading classes that cover pronunciation, comprehension, and discussion. There is also a phrasal verbs class and an idiom class. We also offer a number of classes where a student can participate even if they don't have a microphone by using text chat. Our text classes include Story Writing, Verb Tenses, and a general class that we call Drive-Through English.

**IC:** That is a pretty good variety that shows there are a lot of educational possibilities with SL. How are the students responding?

**GT:** Some feel very lucky to have this opportunity. We had one student who lived in a very rural area of Malaysia. It was 200 km to the nearest brick and mortar English school.

**IC:** 200 km! It's amazing that he even had internet service!

**GT:** I know. That's what I thought too! Perhaps he had a satellite connection, I don't know, but he was very glad to find a school that could help him with reading Wikipedia. Many other students say it is a very unique experience because, in their own countries, their classmates all come from the same background. Here, without any travel expense, they can experience a multi-ethnic classroom.

**IC:** I have worked with a lot of learning technologies, and I must say this was the first time I felt truly immersed in a computer-based lesson. I found myself forgetting I was sitting in my living room. The memory I have of the lesson is eerily similar to any normal memory I may have from the real world, but I have to wonder if the control scheme might be so complicated that it might turn off potential newcomers.

**GT:** Well, yes for every person it is different. For you, as a real world teacher, it may take some time to teach the students the basics of how to use SL, but if they know how to use arrow keys and navigate some menus, it shouldn't take them long to master the basics. Drive-Through ESL classes are designed so that once students make it to Second Life, the learning curve is almost flat. In addition, each class features a Class Runner. Class Runners have administrative tasks such as greeting, informing, and testing new students. During classes they can be used by the teacher as icebreakers for practice and can help individual students deal with technical problems without disrupting class.

**IC:** Having a Class Runner sounds like a good idea for any class, real or virtual. I'm assuming that class runners are student helpers. Do they get some kind of extra credit for helping? How does that work?

**GT:** Well that is one of the parts of Drive-Through ESL I am proud of. You see, students can pay for a lesson, and many do, but they can also work for a program of ours called Help Team. Students who join Help Team earn free lesson time by answering visitors' questions and helping students who attend a class for the first time. At our school, Class Runners are usually members of Help Team, but theirs is a paid position.

 **IC:** That is a good idea. I'm a firm believer that teaching is learning, but now you just said that students pay and Class Runners get paid. How is money exchanged on SL? Could you tell us a little bit about that? I think some people may not be aware that Second Life has its own currency and economy.

**GT:** Yes, students can pay the school through *PayPal* or with *Linden*, Second Life's currency. This is one of the hardest parts for incoming students to master. Different countries have different ways of handling money, and many people are still not accustomed to using electronic currencies. I know that in Japan, students can buy something called *NetCash* which can easily be converted to Second Life Lindens.

**IC:** Oh I have seen that being sold from little ATM machines in convenience stores.

**GT:** Yes, that is the one. Most of our Japanese students use that.

**IC:** About how much does a one hour lesson cost a student?

**GT:** My initial plan for Drive-Through ESL was to have the lessons be the same price as a Big Mac hamburger from McDonalds.

**IC:** That is a really good deal.

**GT:** I think so too, but we should remember that the price of a Big Mac can be quite expensive for people in some countries.

**IC:** Where do your teachers come from?

**GT:** We have teachers from all over the English speaking world. In fact, SL has allowed us to build a community of teachers with a wide range of backgrounds and qualifications that would be financially unfeasible to coordinate in the real world. Some of them are university teachers or conversation school teachers in real life, but what they all have in common is that they are people who visit the school, like what they see, and decide to bring their skills and experience to more diverse groups of students by teaching in virtual worlds. We all learn a lot from each other, and I can't imagine it happening so effortlessly without this technology.

**IC:** In a world with such freedom for design, you must have fun thinking up new and interesting learning environments. I mean, if you want to have your students sitting on the tops of jellyfish instead of chairs, you can!

**GT:** Well, a lot of teachers get carried away designing some extravagant classrooms. We actually have one room that is like a flowering outdoor area, but we rarely use that these days. We have found that in the context of SL, a more traditional, simple look to the classroom is less distracting, and it helps students understand they are attending a real lesson. We do use simulated, real life environments such as restaurants, cafes, airports, hospitals, and banks for a Practical English course that aims at teaching transactional language items. We also visit other fantasy environments during excursion classes.

**IC:** This is another thing that excited me about learning English with SL. Students can take an hour or so to learn English in a classroom with a teacher, but after it is over, they are free to explore the rest of the people and places on the SL grid. SL students are often EFL learners, studying English in the confines of their home countries, but these classes seem to have the characteristics of an ESL class where things learned in class can be taken directly out into the real world or, in this case, the virtual one, and applied immediately. Are we seeing how online communities may further blur the line between ESL and EFL or wipe it out all together?

**GT:** I'm not sure, but I did find myself struggling with what to name the school. Now the school is called Drive-Through ESL, but I am very tempted to change the ESL to ELF or English as the Lingua Franca. This term seems more appropriate for what

we are doing with online communities.

**IC:** That sounds like the beginnings of a philosophical debate that will likely take years to resolve! Giovanni, thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences and feelings with us. It will be a great help to language learners and language teachers alike.

**GT:** Glad I could be of some service. Take care. Ciao.

## Conclusion

After Giovanni teleported away in a swirl of particles, I was left to ponder how virtual worlds might further change the landscape of education. It still remains to be seen if SL will withstand the test of time. It is the largest online virtual community for the moment, but it is quite possible that it will fade away into the digital abyss. However, even if it does, it will most likely leave behind a whole host of virtual worlds vying for attention. For example, Sony has launched *Home*, a graphically stunning virtual world for the Playstation 3 gaming platform, and others are springing up every year, although none are currently as expansive as SL. There is even a company trying to develop an avatar that could jump between worlds so that a user could walk from SL to World of War Craft to Google Earth, which is slated to eventually be fully integrated with virtual reality. As a result, it seems that interaction with other people through virtual worlds is a reality that is here to stay.
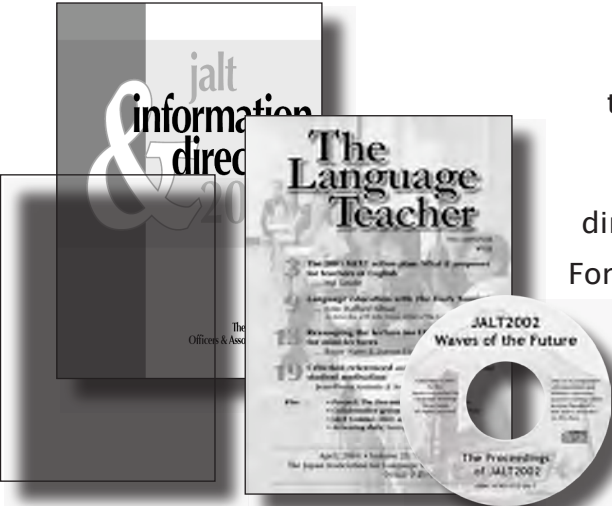
## Getting started with SL

You can get in on the action by visiting the SL main page at <www.secondlife.com>. There is also a *Teen*

*Second Life* geared toward young people that may be more appropriate for some learners. It can be found at <teen.secondlife.com>. When you get to the SL main page, sign up for an avatar account. You will need that to navigate around the world. Then download the free viewer software, install it onto your computer, and log in. SL runs differently on different computers, and will work best on a computer with a decent processor and video card. Since notebook computers generally have simple video cards, you might notice it running a little slow, but the program runs pretty well on most recent desktop computers. Fear not Mac users, there is a version for you, too. If you want to participate in a voice lesson, also make sure you have some speakers and a microphone.

If you need any further assistance, feel free to contact my avatar, Isander Canning in SL. You can find me by using the search function's *People* tab. You can send me a message even if I am offline. You can also get a feel for Giovanni's school without going into Second Life by visiting his home page at <www.drive-through-esl.info>. Hope to see you in-world, and I wish you luck in helping your students explore ESL on SL.

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## …with Myles Grogan & Mark de Boer

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We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 700 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used which can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see any edition of *The Language Teacher*). Please send submissions to <my-share@jalt-publications.org>.

MY SHARE ONLINE

A linked index of My Share articles can be found at:

<jalt-publications.org/tlt/ myshare/>

T HIS month's column sees Charlie Canning introducing research skills to the ELT classroom. After that, Luke Fryer shows us a way to get direct feedback from students in addition to institutional surveys and measures.

# Basic research skills for EFL students

## Charlie Canning

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### Quick guide

**Keywords:** research, Internet, journal, database

**Learner English level:** Low-intermediate to advanced

**Learner maturity:** University to adult

**Preparation time:** 1 hour

**Activity time:** One 90-minute class period and one 90-minute library tour

**Materials:** Computers with Internet access

### Introduction

Most university students in the developed world today have never used a typewriter and may never have to. Although it may be a stretch to say that they have also never used a library, basic research skills are in short supply. Often what we get when we ask our students to do research is a quotation from Wikipedia cut and pasted on a blank page. But good research means more than that. The following activity is designed to teach university students some basic research skills, making use of common resources found in most libraries.

### Procedure

**Step 1:** As a class, decide on a research topic. Some examples of topics can be found in the Appendix. Instruct your students to type a keyword into a search engine (such as Google or Yahoo), and click the "search" button.

**Step 2:** Next, have the students limit the amount of information they receive by adding the abbreviation "EFL" to the keyword or keywords.

**Step 3:** Have the students print out an interesting article.

**Step 4:** Have the students look for a book in the library by doing a search on the online catalogue system (OPAC at most libraries). The library computer will provide a list of the materials that are available on the students' subjects and will also note the location of the materials within the library.

**Step 5:** If the students cannot find what they are looking for in their library, have them look for a book in a neighboring library by using something called the *Union Catalog of Foreign Books* (*Shinshu Yosho Sougo Mokuroku*). If your library has something called Webcat, and most libraries do, your students will be able to search the collections of hundreds of other libraries throughout Japan. Because Webcat functions just like your library's online catalogue (OPAC), all the students have to do is type in a keyword of the subject or the title or the author's last name, and they will be given a list of books and journals available in libraries from Okinawa to Hokkaido.

**Step 6:** Have the students go to the reference desk and arrange to borrow a book at a city, prefectural, national, or university library through interlibrary loan (*Sougo Riyou*). For information about this