THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Participation in language learning in virtual worlds. An exploratory case-study of a Business English course

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Hull

by

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Reality is the totality of all things

This PhD explores the notion of learner participation within the context of online language learning in virtual world platforms. Participation is discussed as learner interaction in the target language with reference, in particular, to Breen (2001) and Lantolf (2000) and as online learner activity as discussed by Bento and Schuster (2003) and Hrastinski (2007). In addition, the study builds more specifically on existing research into learner participation in virtual worlds by Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen (2009) and Peterson (2010). Data was collected through a case study of a Business English course within a European telecollaboration project at tertiary level. The course at the centre of the case study comes under the umbrella of the EU-funded Euroversity Network (www.euroversity.eu). The study makes use of Reflexivity (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) and Exploratory Practice as its core methodological approach to the building of the case. The virtual world data is analysed from a multimodal perspective within CMCL (e.g. Lamy, 2004) and makes use of visualisation (Mason, 2002) as the primary analytical tool. The study provides an expanded definition of learner participation which reflects the learning dynamics of virtual worlds within the specific teaching and learning context. The study evaluates the role played by designer beliefs in determining learner participatory outcomes and makes recommendations for teaching and future course design. The study also illustrates the use of virtual world platforms as a research tool.

Keywords: participation, language learning, language teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computer Mediated Communication in Languages (CMCL), virtual worlds, Business English, EFL, E-learning, Case Study, Exploratory Practice, multimodality, visualisation.
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<tr>
<td>CALL</td>
<td>Computer Assisted Language Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEFR</td>
<td>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLIL</td>
<td>Content and Language Integrated Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Computer Mediated Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMCL</td>
<td>Computer Mediated Communication in Language Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>Exploratory Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f2f</td>
<td>face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA</td>
<td>Key Activity of the LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLP</td>
<td>Life-long Learning Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMORG</td>
<td>Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moo</td>
<td>Multi-user Domain Object Oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenSim</td>
<td>OpenSimulator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td>Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Second Language Acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEFL</td>
<td>Teaching English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEL</td>
<td>Technology Enhanced Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WoW</td>
<td>World of Warcraft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Virtual World Terminology

The following is a list of specific terminology used within this PhD in relation to the virtual world platform of Second Life.

**Artefact:** an artefact within the context of this PhD is a 3D object created by a Second Life resident or user.

**Avatar:** an avatar is a graphic representation of a virtual world user that is visible within the platform.

**Build:** a build is a 3D object which has been designed or “built” and added to the virtual world by a user.

**Holodeck:** a holodeck is like a stage that can be placed in and removed from the virtual world according to how the environment is being used at a certain time. Language teachers often have an inventory of different holodecks they use to create different settings for language learning tasks such as shops, offices, hotel receptions, etc.

**IM:** Instant Messaging.

**Inventory:** an inventory is a folder where information and virtual world objects can be stored in the virtual world. Each avatar has their own inventory.

**In-world:** in-world is a term used by residents (users) of Second Life to refer to Second Life. It means “in the virtual world of Second Life.”

**Newbie:** A newbie is the term used by experienced Second Life residents or users to refer to newcomers (newly created avatars) to the environment.

**Notecards:** Notecards are a Second Life tool used for the sending of textual information that is too long for IM.

**Resident:** a Second Life user.

**Rez:** To rez an object in Second Life means to make it appear by taking it out of an inventory. This process usually takes place in real time and is used by teachers to change the setting or scene for an activity during a lesson, for example.

**Slurl:** a Second Life url.

**Snapshot:** Second Life provides users with a snapshot function that enables users to take snapshots of the environment they are in.

**Teleport:** To teleport means to travel or to move to a specific location within the platform. This function is activated by selecting the teleport function available in different menus within the platform.
Websites and Slurls

Avalon: http://avalon.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/

Avalon Island in Second Life:
http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/AVALON%20Learning/11/183/59


Eurocall: http://www.eurocall-languages.org/

Eurocall/Calico VW SIG: http://virtualworldssig.ning.com/

Euroversity: http://www.euroversity.eu/

Euroversity at Hull University: http://www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/modern-languages/project/euroversity.aspx

Joyn2.0: www.joynlanguages.eu

Kamimo Island in Second Life:
http://slurl.com/secondlife/Kamimo%20Island/%20127/148/25

Niflar: http://cms.hum.uu.nl/niflar/

OpenSimulator: http://opensimulator.org/wiki/Main_Page

Second Life: http://secondlife.com/

Second Life® Welcome Island:

Talkademy: http://www.talkademy.org/

Talkademy Island Forum Europe in Second Life:
http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Forum%20Europe/128/128/0/ and
http://goo.gl/LFwX6c

Virtlantis: http://www.virtlantis.com/

World of Warcraft: http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/
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Chapter 1 Introduction

“One of the main challenges in Web-based education is to understand and encourage student participation.” (Bento and Schuster, 2003: 157)

1.0 Introductory overview

This PhD examines the notion of learner participation in language learning in virtual worlds. This PhD is based on a case study of a Business English course which was run in the 3D virtual world of Second Life (Linden Research, 2014a) as part of a collaborative project between the University of Hull, the educational charity, Talkademy, in Austria, and the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld, Germany. All three institutions are members of the EU funded network Euroversity (Euroversity, 2011a) which brings together educational institutions with an interest in virtual worlds. This research project draws on my professional expertise and experience of course design for language learning in virtual worlds, my previous practitioner researcher publications based on Action Research principles, and a review of the literature into learner participation in language learning. In particular, this PhD brings together literature on learner participation from the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Applied Linguistics, Classroom Research and Language Teaching, online learning and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) including CMCL. CMCL is defined by Lamy and Hampel (2007: 7) as Computer Mediated Communication in the field of language learning and teaching (hence the “L” in CMCL). The review also includes references to the Telecollaboration literature on online language student collaboration for intercultural exchange (e.g. Belz and Thorne, 2006; Dooley, 2008; Guth and Helm, 2010; O’Dowd, 2006a; Warschauer, 1996) and the literature within CMCL in relation to virtual worlds.
1.1 How it all started. The Avalon and Euroversity projects.

In 2007 I started exploring the virtual world platform of Second Life with a group of colleagues from Sweden. As foreign language teachers and syllabus designers for both face-to-face (f2f) and online language courses at tertiary level, we are always on the look out for new ways to enrich and contextualise our classroom-based language learning and teaching, to enable students to come into contact with native speakers of their target language and, in the case of our online courses, to bring geographically dispersed students into contact with other students. When I first entered Second Life in August 2007, voice-chat had just become available to users (or to “residents,” as Second Life users are referred to). I was immediately struck by what I felt could be a wonderful educational resource and medium for language teaching and learning. In 2008, we started running pilot courses in Second Life, the outcomes of which can be found in several publications and conference presentations from around that time (Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2008; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; 2009b; Deutschmann, Panichi, and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2008; Panichi et al., 2008). This initial exploration led to us to want to take things further. Building on contacts with others working in the field in Europe and in the US, we submitted a 10-partner proposal for EU funding for Research and Development (R&D) under KA 3 (ICT) of the Life-long Learning Programme (LLP) and which developed into the Avalon project (Avalon, 2008a). Avalon (Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online) ran from the beginning of 2009 to the end of 2010 and was coordinated by the School of Education at the University of Manchester, UK. I was involved as the coordinator of the main developmental workpackage through the Language Centre of the University of Pisa where I work as a foreign language lecturer. The aim of the project was to develop and
test learning scenarios and materials for language learning in virtual worlds in tertiary educational contexts in Europe. The outcomes of the project can be found on the project website (Avalon, 2008d). My involvement in the Avalon project and my contribution to the development of its courses and outcomes can be considered as playing a fundamental role in the shaping of my thinking and my own professional development in the lead-up to the beginning of my PhD in March 2010.

The Avalon project experience led us to realise that there were a number of colleagues across Europe working with virtual worlds and reality, though often in total isolation. The momentum gathered under the AVALON project led a group of us to want to take things further and apply for funding to establish a network of experts and virtual world practitioners in Europe. In 2010, together with Klaus Hamme rmüller, co-founder of Talkademy, we wrote the initial proposal for just such a network. The proposal was accepted for European funding in 2011 under KA3 of the LLP and is coordinated by the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures at the University of Hull, UK with support from the School of Arts and New Media. The Euroversity Network is funded until November 2014 and brings together 19 partners from across Europe and Israel. The aim of the network is to create a community of practitioners in virtual-world education across all subject areas and is not limited to language learning (Euroversity, 2011b). One of the main outcomes of the Network is the Good Practice Framework (Euroversity, 2013) which aims to provide guidelines for the running and management of educational projects in virtual worlds in tertiary and adult education and training. The Euroversity Network has acted as the backdrop to the research project described in this thesis. More specifically, my PhD (2010-2014) has spanned over both aforementioned projects. Indeed, it was within the dynamics of the Avalon project that the initial idea for this PhD was developed and within the Euroversity follow-up project that the data for my PhD was generated.
1.2 Research rationale

With the increasing endorsement of socio-cultural theories of learning within second and foreign language learning (e.g. Breen, 2001; Firth and Wagner, 1997; 2007; Lafford, 2007; Lantolf, 2000; van Lier, 2004) and in web-based education in general (e.g. Bento and Schuster, 2003; Harasim, 2012; Hrastinski, 2007; Salmon, 2011), greater attention has been placed on learner participation as a key component of learning over the last 10-15 years. At the same time, the language teaching and research literature has also suggested that we take a broader look at learner interaction and participation in the interest of a discussion about classroom talk and interaction as learner discourse (Breen, 2001b; 2001c). At the outset of my PhD in 2010, research in CMCL was limited to an investigation primarily of learner interaction and participation in virtual worlds as linguistic activity (Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009b; Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Peterson, 2006; 2010b; Schwienhorst, 2004b; Sykes, 2005; Zheng et al., 2009). This linguistic activity in the virtual world environment was captured essentially by the computer-generated logs of text-based chat and recordings of voice-chat which were generally transcribed for further analysis. At around that time, a specific call for more research on the topic of learner participation in virtual worlds was also forthcoming in the literature (Peterson, 2011). However, it seemed to me at the time that the focus of the virtual world research literature, including my own, on learner participation as linguistic activity was providing a limited understanding of the phenomenon and of the context within which it was being discussed. This, I felt, was particularly strident in relation to the virtual world platform which, with its visual and graphic dimension, seemed to me to be calling out for a methodological approach which could take into consideration the visual data generated by the platform as well as the linguistic data. This was also in line with a call for a more multimodal approach to research into learner interaction in CMCL which had been
initiated in relation to audio-graphic conferencing systems (e.g. Lamy, 2004; Flewitt et. al., 2009) and which was also relevant to virtual world platforms (cf. Lamy and Hampel, 2007). The aim of my PhD was thus to examine what was going on in this specific platform in relation to language learner participation through the use of an exploratory research framework. By doing so, I aimed to go beyond a description of learner participation as only verbal participation in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the discourse of learner interaction in the virtual world classroom.

1.2.1 Research questions

As a result of the aims described in the section above, my research project identified the following research questions.

1) What is meant by language-learner participation in virtual worlds?

1.1) How does it manifest itself?

1.2.2 The Practitioner Researcher context

In the initial protocol for this PhD project I had planned to observe and collect data from a course run by fellow practitioners in a virtual world platform. However, due to the limited number of courses available for observation in virtual worlds (we were still very much a niche community at the time) and as a result of my direct involvement with the Euroversity Network, this PhD ended up seeing me involved in the triple role of researcher, teacher and course developer for the Talkademy Business English Course. While this outcome undoubtedly added to the complexity of the project both in terms of data generation and data analysis, it has, nevertheless, allowed for me to build on and continue with my Practitioner Research approach to the field discussed above and has provided me with privileged insight that can only come from being intimately connected with one’s research context. As such, this PhD also needs to be read as my struggle to do justice, on the one hand, to the data as a researcher (what the data can or cannot say) and to my knowledge as a virtual world teacher and course developer on the
other (what I know based on my experience of the events and my knowledge of the context). As such, I would also like to suggest that this PhD be viewed as a snapshot of where we were as EU-funded pioneer language teachers and developers within virtual worlds at the time (what we knew, what we wanted to learn, where we envisioned we were going and why). This PhD is, thus, an attempt to relate that thinking and knowledge base to general language educational concerns as reflected in the research literature.

In addition to the above, this PhD stands as an example of my response to the call in the Practitioner Research literature in language learning and teaching to think about practice and research not as mutually exclusive activities but rather as processes that build on each other (Richards, 2003; Allwright 2003; 2005). In short, this PhD provides an illustration of how I combined, on the one hand, my practitioner “puzzle” as defined within the Practitioner Research approach known as Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright, 2003) with my research questions, on the other, in an attempt to inform both research and practice at the same time. The need for more Practitioner Research of this kind is also emphasised in the CMCL literature (Lamy and Hampel, 2007).

1.3 Virtual worlds in language education

Virtual world platforms are generally understood as computer generated environments where users can interact online in real time with other users and the environment via an avatar. An avatar is a graphic representation of the user which is visible within the environment. The following is a still taken from the recordings of the data collected under this research project and illustrates what a 3D virtual world “looks like”.
Over the last seven years, there has been an increased interest in virtual world platforms for language teaching and learning within CMCL and CALL, though practitioner and researcher interest is still limited and additional research is required (Peterson, 2010; 2011; Wang, Deutschmann, and Steinvall, 2013; Wigham, 2012). The small number of members of the Virtual World Special Interest Group (VW SIG)\(^1\) within EUROCALL, the European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning,\(^2\) compared to the much larger membership of the other Eurocall SIG’s is an indication of this. However, at the last Eurocall conference in Evora, Portugal, 2013, members of the VW SIG confirmed the need to remain as a separate interest group within Eurocall while recognising, at the same time, the clear overlap with other forms and areas of CMCL practice and research represented by some of the other Eurocall SIGs (Eurocall VW Sig, 2013). It can, thus, be argued that the virtual world community within Eurocall recognises that the use of virtual worlds leads to unique practitioner, researcher and development needs compared to the use of other synchronous (i.e. for real time

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\(^1\) http://virtualworldssig.ning.com/
\(^2\) http://www.eurocall-languages.org/
communication) CMC platforms such as video-conferencing or text-based telecollaborative platforms including blogs, etc., justifying the ongoing need for a dedicated forum.

Some of the most commonly known 3D virtual world platforms are designed for entertainment and social interaction and allow users to contribute to the environment by building 3D objects. These are generally referred to as social virtual worlds (Peachey et al., 2010a; Wigham, 2012). The most well-known virtual world platform of this kind is Second Life. On the other hand, World of Warcraft (WoW) (Battle.net, 2014) is probably the most well-known virtual world game where players interact with other players according to the computer scripting of the platform and the specific rules of the game. These virtual worlds are generally referred to as game worlds (Peachey et al., 2010a) or gaming worlds (e.g. Wigham, 2012). Other virtual worlds, such as OpenSim (OpenSimulator) are essentially building environments (OpenSimulator, 2014). In Open Sim, users can design from scratch the kind of environment they want.

Without doubt, the most significant characteristic of 3D virtual worlds for language learning and teaching, compared to other online learning platforms, is their “immersiveness” or the extent to which they are immersive (e.g. de Jong Derrington and Homewood, 2008; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Jauregi et al., 2011; Molkada-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molkada-Danielsen, 2010; Peterson, 2011; Schwienhorst, 2004a; 2009). According to de Freitas et al. (2010: 70), at the heart of the immersive experiences is the presence of the learner or user as an ‘avatar’ in the virtual space. This avatar represents the embodiment of the user in the virtual space and facilitates a greater sense of control within the immersive environments, allowing users to more readily engage with the experiences as they unfold in real time (Gazzard, 2009 cited in de Freitas et al., 2010: 70). This immersive nature of the platforms has implications in terms of language learner activity and
participation (e.g. Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Jauregi et al., 2011; Peterson, 2006; 2011; Schweinhorst, 2009; Wigham, 2012; Wigham and Chanier, 2012; Zheng et al., 2009). The immersive nature of 3D virtual world platforms is a characteristic which is also endorsed by the general literature on virtual worlds as playing an important role in the educational use of these platforms (e.g. Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; Dalgarno et al., 2013; de Freitas et al., 2010; Martin, 2013b; Peachey et al., 2010; Salmon, 2009, Warburton, 2009). Role-play activities are considered to be particularly enhanced by virtual world platforms (e.g. de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010; Dalgarno et al., 2013; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; 2013; Harasim, 2012; Jæger and Helgheim, 2009; Lim, 2009; Moschini, 2010) as are action-based learning activities (e.g. Bignell and Parson, 2010; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009) and problem-based learning approaches (Brown, Gordon and Hobbs, 2008). Last but not least, the immersiveness of the platform also has implications in language education in relation to intercultural learning (e.g. Jauregi et al., 2011; Outakoski, 2014; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010) and learner identity construction (Wigham, 2012). The role of virtual worlds in relation to identity construction is also discussed in the general educational literature on virtual worlds (e.g. Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; Martin, 2013a; Lim, 2009).

In addition to the above, the fact that many virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are openly accessible platforms means that it is possible to interact with native speakers of the target language by visiting specific places in the platform (e.g. de Jong Derrington and Homewood, 2008; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010). Access to native speakers of the target language one wishes to learn is also possible by taking part in virtual world gaming environments also known as MMORGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) of which WoW, mentioned above, is an example. In their 2012 review of games including virtual worlds, Cornillie, Thorne and Desmet (2012) highlight how WoW supports a number of
major world languages and reflects the presence of an increasingly diverse population in terms of social strata, ages and linguistic backgrounds. A study by Peterson (2012b), for example, looks at the learning and participation that takes place through structured access to WoW of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Japan. However, not all virtual worlds are open to the general public and can be used in this way.\(^3\)

In foreign/second language\(^4\) education and mother-tongue education, virtual worlds are used both as a way of enhancing f2f teaching and learning (e.g. Carter, 2009; Leong, 2011; Peterson, 2006), as a platform for institutionally driven online learning and telecollaboration (e.g. Jauregi \textit{et al.}, 2011; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Schweinhorst, 2004a; Wigham and Chanier, 2013; Zheng \textit{et al.}, 2009) and informal language learning (e.g. Cornillie, Thorne and Desmet 2012; de Jong Derrington and Homewood, 2008). There are also examples of how virtual worlds are used in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) contexts whereby subject content is delivered via the target language (Bani \textit{et al.}, 2009; Wigham and Chanier, 2013). In Heritage Language education, virtual worlds are also used as a tool for linguistic and cultural revitalisation (Deutschmann \textit{et. al.}, 2010; Outakoski, 2014).

Finally, within the context of this PhD, the literature that has been identified as relevant to a discussion of learner participation in virtual worlds includes studies carried out in some of the earlier versions of virtual worlds such as Moos (Multi-user Domain Object Oriented environments) (Davies, 2009; Lamy and Hampel, 2007) up to the more developed such as Second Life and WoW. In addition, this PhD draws on relevant literature from experiences from within both social and gaming worlds. The main features all of these platforms share in common from a more technical point of view are

\(^3\) The Avalon project website provides an initial review of different virtual worlds and their specific affordances for language learning which was current through to project completion in 2010 (Avalon, 2008c).

\(^4\) For a recent overview of the blurring boundaries between “second” and “foreign” language teaching and learning see Cook (2011). The distinction between the two is not considered relevant for the purposes of this PhD. My use of the terms can be seen to reflect the general use in the literature to which I refer.
the synchronicity of learner interaction (i.e. learners interact in real time), the permanency of the environment (i.e. the environment/platform exists independently of the users) and learner interaction via avatars whereby users may interact via verbal communication channels (i.e. text-based chat or voice-chat) and by touching or moving items within the environment. Finally, there is also an overlap with the literature on audiographic environments. Audiographic conferencing platforms are defined together with virtual worlds by Lamy and Hampel (2007:131) as network based tools for communication in real time and for the collaborative creation of texts and graphics.

Finally, it has been suggested in the literature that the term “virtual” is in itself ambiguous (Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Wigham, 2012). Firstly, the term is also used to refer to online learning platforms in general and, secondly, the term “virtual” suggests that what we are referring to is somehow not real. For several researchers and teachers working with virtual worlds in education, there is no doubt that what goes on in these platforms is real, making the distinction between virtual reality and non-virtual reality questionable (e.g. Macintyre, 2008; Martin, 2013b; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Wigham, 2012). For this reason, some researchers prefer to use the term “synthetic reality” claiming it is less ambiguous and choose to distinguish between what happens within the virtual world platform with the expression “synthetic world” and to activity outside of the platform with the term “first world” or “face-to-face world” (Wigham 2012: 109-110). For the purposes of this PhD, I have chosen to use the more generic, albeit perhaps slightly ambiguous term, virtual worlds. When referring to the distinction between the platform and f2f or offline interactions, I prefer to use the terms “virtual world” and “non-virtual world”

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3 For an overview of the technical features used to define more recent virtual worlds, see Peachey et. al. (2010a). For an overview of the history of virtual worlds in language learning in relation to their technical features, see Davies (2009). For a general overview of virtual world platforms and research in language learning, see Peterson (2011).
respectively as a way of counterbalancing the (diehard) natural tendency we seem to have of thinking about virtual reality as an add on to reality rather than part of it.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into additional seven chapters as described in this section. The chapters in this PhD are to be read as part of my story of exploration. Chapters 1 and 2 are literature reviews which helped me explore my topic in greater depth. The aim of these two chapters was to open up the discussion around participation so that, when I came to look at my data in Chapter 6 and 7, I would be ready to see things I had not been able to see before and to relate my findings to the broader discussion. The decision to review the literature in such wide terms was based on my need to verify to what extent, if any, current discussion in the field was indeed narrow and could be broadened. Thus, Chapters 2 and 3 are not to be read as an exhaustive coverage of the topic but rather as an initial identification of possible areas of relevance. Additional areas of relevance that emerged from my analysis of the data are added to the discussion directly in Chapter 7 as they become relevant. Chapter 4 is my main methodology chapter and it is where I attempt to make sense of my involvement in the project in relation to my multiple roles and to build an exploratory research framework which would be able to do justice to the complexity and aims of my research context, on the one hand, and which was in line with my ontological and epistemological beliefs, on the other. Chapter 5 is the case study description which attempts to capture the complexity of the research project as a whole and provide, at the same time, the contextual data to support me in my interpretation of the virtual world data in Chapter 7. As such, Chapter 5 is the first step towards analysis. Chapters 6 sorts through the different data sets generated by the case study and identifies appropriate procedures for analysis in Chapter 7. Chapter 7 takes a fresh look at learner participation through the lens developed in Chapter 6. Chapter 8 qualifies my findings within my contextual and methodological constraints
and looks at what the implications may be for teaching and research from the new way of looking at learner participation developed in Chapter 7.

In this section on the structure of my thesis I also make reference to relevant publications I was involved in during my PhD (from 2010 to 2013) and how they have informed my research chapter by chapter. For one of these publications I was the sole author, in two of the publications I was the lead author, in one publication I was second co-author and in one publication I was the third author.

The chapters are now reviewed in greater detail.

**Chapter 2.** The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the issues in relation to participation in language learning in general in an attempt to be able to determine the extent to which they may be relevant across teaching and learning contexts and can inform the discussion around language learner participation in virtual world platforms as well. The chapter starts by explaining the emergence of the notion of participation in SLA research and relates it to a discussion of socio-cultural theories of language learning. It achieves this by providing an analysis of learner participation as it is discussed in SLA, Classroom Research, and in the Language Learning and Teaching literature. This analysis suggests a strong link between learning and participation and highlights the need for further research in the area. Learner participation emerges from the discussion primarily as learner linguistic activity and target language use in the classroom and in relation to affective and contextual issues.

**Chapter 3** extends the discussion in Chapter 2 by suggesting that participation is of such salience in online learning contexts that a case can be made for participation as a theory of learning. The aim of this chapter is, thus, to provide an understanding of the issues in relation to participation in online learning, in general, and in CMCL, in particular, in an attempt to highlight those issues which are relevant to learner participation across platforms and those which are specific to virtual world platforms. A
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discussion of multimodality in the virtual world literature leads into an analysis of participation as learner verbal and non-verbal activity. Finally and in a similar way to Chapter 2, Chapter 3 also highlights the affective and contextual issues that come into play in relation to a discussion of participation in online language learning such as task design. In doing so, this chapter also reviews my more recently published research in the area in relation to task design and the affordances of virtual worlds for language learning and how they may impact on participation (Deutschmann and Panichi, 2013; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molk-Danielsen, 2010; Deutschmann, Molk-Danielsen, and Panichi, 2011).

Chapter 4 discusses the methodological approach to this research project. It illustrates how through a process of Reflexive Methodology as defined by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) I arrived at framing my research project as a case-study (e.g. Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995) within the Practitioner Research tradition of Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003; 2005). In this chapter I critically review the different methodological approaches used by other researchers in the field including the Action Research approach of my previous published research, and justify the need for an exploratory case study both as a way of going beyond current methodological approaches to my research topic and as a way of attempting to broaden current understanding of my topic. In addition, through the reflective processes described in this chapter, I explain how I was able to gain an overview of my different roles in the research project as designer, teacher and researcher. The reflective process also led me to a discussion of the relevance of Classroom Research to a discussion of learner participation in virtual worlds thus expanding on the literature base for my research project even further. An additional outcome of this process was an analysis of virtual worlds as a tool for reflective practice as initially suggested in my single authored publication (Panichi,
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2012) and as a data collection platform as we discuss in Panichi and Deutschmann (2012).

Chapter 5 is a description of the Talkademy Business English Course at the heart of my case study. It discusses the rationale for the course selection and the course design process. In doing so, it makes reference to the previous experiences of similar courses run under the Avalon project as discussed in Deutschmann and Panichi (2013) and also mentioned above in relation to task design in Chapter 3. It provides an overview of the course syllabus and a discussion of the course implementation. This chapter provides the research project with the description of the case-study and additional relevant contextual data which I use in my discussion of learner participation in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the data generation and classification process and leads into a first level of analysis of the data. Chapter 6 concludes with the development of the analytical framework used in the analysis of the virtual world data in Chapter 7. The main aim of this chapter is to explain the distinction I made in terms of data which was relevant to the description of the case study and data from the virtual world recordings more specifically. This distinction enabled me to establish the starting point for my analysis of learner participation and provides a justification for a reading of the virtual world data in Chapter 7 as visual data (e.g. Mason, 2002). Finally, this chapter also draws on my critical review of research methods in virtual worlds published in Panichi and Deutschmann (2012) in which we discuss some of the ethical concerns in using virtual worlds for research purposes. This publication has also been mentioned in relation to Chapter 4.

Chapter 7 provides an analysis and discussion of the virtual world data in relation to learner participation as it is defined in the analytical framework developed in Chapter 6. Through a visual analysis of learner activity in the platform in relation to the features of the platform and the course design, this chapter provides a description of learner
participation in response to my research questions. Limitations of my study and specific future research angles are discussed as they arise and become relevant to this discussion.

**Chapter 8** provides an overview of the research findings and lists a number of ways in which the research process and outcomes are limited with specific reference to the case-study data and the EP framework. The outcomes of this research project are to be found in a definition of learner participation and the illustration of a viable research framework for multimodal research in virtual worlds. This chapter examines how my contribution expands on the current understandings of learner participation discussed in the literature. This chapter relates the findings to teaching practice and to the *Good Practice Framework* of the Euroversity Network. It provides a summary of future research angles based on the outcomes of the research project and in relation to the adoption of specific research approaches.

**A note on the presentation of data**

The data in this PhD was originally presented in two formats to the examiners: stills from the recordings of the virtual world lessons and short clips from the recordings saved as mp4 files. All data is presented in Chapter 7. The clips were available for viewing on a CD Rom attached to the soft-bound copies of this thesis. The stills from Chapter 7 are presented in colour in this PhD. The stills have also been saved in digital format and are available for consultation as digital files together with the clips upon written request to the author and for research purposes only. The digital presentation of the stills allows for greater visual quality. The stills in Chapter 7 are numbered and tagged by lesson number, the number of the recording from the lesson and with reference to the time frame expressed in minutes. The one still presented in this chapter and the stills presented in Chapter 5 are used for illustration purposes only. They are part of the Case Study description and have not been included in the CD Rom as they
are not the focus of analysis within the chapter. They are referred to with a number and a short title.
Chapter 2 Participation in Language Learning and Teaching

“In essence, language ‘use’ in a classroom is woven within the discourse of that classroom” (Breen, 2001c: 131).

2.0 Introduction

This chapter firstly examines the emergence of the notion of participation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Applied Linguistics as a result of a shift of focus in the field from language learning as “acquisition” to one of learning as a social and cultural process (Firth and Wagner, 1997). This shift was later defined as the Social Turn in SLA (Block, 2003) and has been extensively reviewed in recent years (e.g. Block, 2007; Firth and Wagner, 2007; Lafford, 2007; Lantolf and Thorne, 2007; Lantolf and Becket, 2009; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Secondly, the chapter illustrates how the broadening of the framing of the field of SLA and Applied Linguistics through a socio-cultural perspective (e.g. Firth and Wagner, 1997; 2007; Lantolf, 2001c; Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001; van Lier, 2000) has also lead to a wider understanding of the factors that come into play in looking at language learning in terms of participation. Thirdly, this chapter analyses definitions of participation as reflected in the language learning and teaching research literature (e.g. Breen, 2001b) in an attempt to explain its current salience as a topic of my research. The final section of this chapter will discuss the notion of participation from a critical stance (Holliday, 1997).

2.1 The participation versus acquisition metaphor of learning

In her much cited article, Sfard (1998) represents emerging tensions in the field of education at the time in terms of two existing metaphors for learning: acquisition and participation. According to Sfard, the Acquisition Metaphor (AM) describes our
understanding of learning as the acquisition or accumulation of knowledge parts or facts that, once acquired, can then be transferred to new contexts and shared with others (op. cit. p. 5-6). The Participation Metaphor (PM), on the other hand, describes learning as an activity involving others in some form of collective dialogue (op. cit. p. 6). Sfard suggests that the AM represents knowledge as something we can have or possess, while the PM refers to accessing knowledge as a result of “doing” (ibid.). She writes:

“While the concept of acquisition implies that there is a clear end point to the process of learning, the new terminology leaves no room for halting signals. Moreover, the ongoing learning activities are never considered separately from the context within which they take place […] The set of new key words that, along with the noun "practice," prominently features the terms "discourse" and "communication" suggests that the learner should be viewed as a person interested in participation in certain kinds of activities rather than in accumulating private possessions.” (Sfard, 1998: 6).

In short, Sfard’s (1998) understanding of participation involved learning by doing in social contexts that are mediated by dialogue. The relevance of some of these key concepts to a discussion on participation in language learning and the extent to which SLA and Applied Linguistics reflected a similar development and reconceptualisation of the field (e.g. Donato, 2000; Firth and Wagner, 1997; 2007; Lantolf, 2000a; 2000c; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000) will be the focus of the following section.

2.1.1 Participation and a focus on the emic perspective

Firth and Wagner’s seminal work (1997) in the field of SLA and Applied Linguistics allowed for a broadening of the understanding of SLA research and practice and for the development of new research foci. Their article entitled On Discourse, Communication and (Some) Fundamental Concepts in SLA Research supports many of the changes in
understanding of learning expressed by Sfard (1998). In particular, it is worth noting that both Firth and Wagner on the one hand, and Sfard, on the other, while writing at approximately the same time were, nevertheless, at least from what can be gathered from their respective references lists, not aware of the similarity of the work they were engaged in. They were addressing the same issues from within two very distinct disciplines: Linguistics (Firth and Wagner) and Mathematics (Sfard). It is also worth pointing out that both publications use an identical choice of words to describe the key notions around which the shift in their respective fields was taking place: discourse and communication.

Building on existing discomfort with the limitations of SLA theory expressed by others in the field (e.g. Block, 1996; Breen, 1985; Kramsch, 1993; Lantolf, 1996; Lantolf and Appel, 1984; Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Rampton, 1987; van Lier, 1994), Firth and Wagner (1997) set out to address some of the assumptions underlying SLA research at the time and to explain, from a theoretical perspective, the increasingly diversified field. While it was argued that the understanding of language learning as the systematic and progressive acquisition of discrete linguistic features by the second language learner (cf. the Input Hypothesis, Krashen, 1985; and the Output Hypothesis of Swain, 1985) in controlled settings still held a place within SLA research, it was nevertheless put forward by the authors that there was an imbalance or, rather, an in-built bias in the focus of SLA research at the time which led to other areas of relevancy being neglected. Firth and Wagner (op.cit.) argued that the focus on “acquisition” and on “language” was to the detriment of the equally important social, interactional and contextual dimensions of language learning. Furthermore, they highlighted how the acquisition metaphor placed the learner in a constant situation of deficiency in relation to his or her learning. What the acquisition metaphor on which SLA was based seemed to emphasise was the learner’s lack of knowledge in relation to some idealised native-speaker rather than the
learner’s development in relation to his or her existing knowledge base. In addition, it was also argued that SLA continued to focus on learner’s acquisition of fixed lexical and grammatical items in highly controlled learning environments. To conclude, as a result of their problematising the ontological assumptions around which SLA had been built, the authors proposed that SLA research take an increasingly *emic* or “participant-relevant” perspective (*op. cit.* p. 758) whereby the learner/participant view of learning could be accounted for to a greater extent and language learning could be studied in contexts other than that of the second language classroom, for example. They argued that the prevailing *etic* or “analyst-relevant” perspective (*op. cit.* p. 760) which privileged the outsider or researcher view of learning dynamics was not able to provide a complete understanding of what was going on.

### 2.1.2 Language learning, language use and participation

Firth and Wagner’s questioning of the field (1997) sparked an engaged debate for over 10 years which culminated in 2007 with the publication in the Modern Language Journal of a special issue fully dedicated to the re-conceptualisation of the field of SLA.

For this edition of the journal, Firth and Wagner (2007) developed their initial ideas further and responded to criticism from the field (e.g. Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997; Long, 1997; Poulisse, 1997, all cited in Firth and Wagner, 2007). The article was entitled *Second/Foreign Language Learning as a Social Accomplishment: Elaborations on a Reconceptualized SLA*. It is worth noting the introduction in the title of the term *Second/Foreign Language Learning* as an indication of this process of re-conceptualisation of SLA.

In this new article, the authors shift their focus onto the development of socio-cultural and socio-interactionist theory in the field of language learning (e.g. Hall, 2004; Lantolf, 2000c; Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Thorne, 2000). According to the so called “social” theories as described
by the authors, learning cannot be separated from its social and interactional dimension. Key to understanding the social-interactionist approach to learning, is, according to the authors, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) whereby learning is situated in social interaction and a model of learning based on the learner’s desire to become a member of a specific community of practice is developed.

The authors continue their review by highlighting the inter-relatedness of language use, language learning and language acquisition. To this end, they argue that language acquisition is an outcome of language use and that it does not make sense to attempt to differentiate between the two. In particular, they argue (op. cit. p. 807) for an understanding of language learning as social accomplishment. In other words, language use is what people do to fulfil a purpose of some sort. This understanding of language use and language learning as social accomplishment leads the authors to explore L2 learning outside of the classroom such as in work-based contexts. Indeed, it is when language use occurs within the context of purposeful interaction involving processes of joint participation with others that learning emerges as co-participation1 (op. cit. p. 807).

2.1.3 Encompassing both metaphors in research and teaching practice

I have observed that several key researchers and practitioners (e.g. Firth and Wagner 1997; 2007; Graham, 2011; Lafford, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Ortega 2009;) call for an approach to SLA and Applied Linguistics research that is able to use the two metaphors as complementary views rather than antagonistic.

An interesting example of how the acceptance of more than one metaphor is beneficial to teachers and learners emerges from a small scale study by Graham (2001). Graham (2001) uses a discussion of the two metaphors in her analysis of learner strategies in a self-access language-learning context. The study demonstrates how the use of strategies

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1 My italics.
by the learner which reflect an understanding of language learning as represented by the AM lead to certain learning outcomes, while those employed by another student, and which were more in line with a PM, led to a different set of learning outcomes. In her conclusion, Graham suggests that awareness by practitioners of the existence of the two metaphors can lead to teachers providing more appropriate and tailored support to learners.

A secondary, yet enlightening, point made by Graham (2001) in her discussion of learning metaphors in language learning is that it is possible to pinpoint existing understandings of language learning in the field by some of the titles of the key works pre-Firth-and-Wagner-1997. Graham highlights (op. cit. para. 4) how Larsen-Freeman and Long's *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* (1991) and Ellis's *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (1994) clearly place the term “acquisition” at the centre of their work. The shift in the way the field has gradually endorsed the metaphor of participation can be noted in other publications. For example, it is interesting to note that Lantolf uses “second language learning” in his 2000 title, Block (2003) devotes three separate chapters in his book the “Social Turn” to problematise across the board the notions of “second”, “language” and “acquisition” in SLA. Several years later, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) speak of “language development” eliminating both the “second” and the “learning” from the title. Hinkel’s 2011 Handbook is entitled simply *Handbook in Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* with no explicit reference to SLA in the title and only one chapter out of 57 that makes explicit reference to SLA research. I would, thus, like to conclude this section by suggesting that not only has what has come to be known as the Social Turn in SLA allowed for new paradigms to emerge but that this has also had an impact on how the field itself is defined (*cf.* Firth and Wagner, 2007). In addition, I would like to suggest that, with the repositioning of the term “acquisition”, the looser notion of
“learning” is also being probed. It is not surprising, therefore, that other ways of talking about learning, such as “participation” have also become more prominent in a debate where what is meant by learning cannot be established in such unequivocal terms as acquisition (cf. Breen, 2001c; Firth and Wagner, 1997; Larsen-Freeman, 2002; van Lier, 2004; Zobl, 1995).

Furthermore, and as a result of the change in metaphors, the field has also been characterised by the emergence of new theoretical approaches to research and a broadening of the field in general (Firth and Wagner, 2007: 805; Zuengler and Miller, 2006). Examples have been the development of the Ecology of Language Learning (van Lier, 2004; Kramsch, 2002a; 2002b; 2008), the introduction of Chaos and Complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; 2002), Language Emergence (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman, 2006), an increased interest in Conversation Analysis (CA) (Larsen-Freeman, 2004) and Socialisation Theories (Duff, 2003; Zuengler and Cole, 2005), the emergence of a debate around World Englishes (Canagarajah, 2000; Jenkins, 2003) and an increasing interest in the use of discursive practices of language learners when engaged with new technologies (Gee, 2003; Kern, 2006; Lam, 2000; Thorne, 2003; Warschauer, 1997).

2.2 Participation in socio-cultural theories of learning

According to socio-cultural theories of language learning (Donato, 1994; 2000; Kramsch, 2000; Lantolf, 1994; 1996; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1995; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Thorne, 2000; 2005; van Lier, 2000; 2004), the process of learning as participation can be considered “social” in a similar way to that discussed in Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007) insofar as it involves interaction with others. In particular, socio-cultural theories of learning are based around the notion of mediation (e.g. Lantolf, 2000a; van Lier, 2004). Lantolf (2000b) traces the notion of mediation in Sociocultural theory back to Vygotsky’s (1987) discussion of learning as interaction with members of our culture.
and their cultural artefacts including language. In relation to language learning, Lantolf indicates various possibilities of mediation. On the one hand, he points to social mediation. Social mediation, according to Lantolf (op. cit. pp. 81-86) can be between either expert-novice, as in the case of interactions between native speakers of the language and the learner, or among peers, as is the case of interaction among fellow students in the classroom, for example. In addition to social mediation, Lantolf also discusses the use of the L1 as a mediating artefact in educational contexts (op. cit. pp. 86-88) and the use of self-mediation or “private” speech learners engage in when talking to themselves or reflecting on their language learning (op. cit. pp. 88-90). Additional mediating artefacts other than language are, according to Lantolf, cultural artefacts which, in the context of second language learning, are made up by portfolios, tasks and technology (op. cit. pp. 90-93).

2.2.1 Participation as activity

Socio-cultural theory also makes a clear distinction between tasks and activities (Lantolf 2000a; 2000b; 2000c). Based on the initial distinction byVykosky (1978; 1986 cited in Lantolf 2000b) which was later developed within Activity Theory by Leontiev (1978 cited in Lantolf 2000a) and Engström (1987; 1999 cited in Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001), change and learning take place when we are engaged in some sort of activity. In language learning, activity can be triggered by tasks but compliance with tasks is neither an indication of learning nor an endorsement by the learner of the relevance of the specific task to his or her learning (cf. Lantolf, 2000a). The outcome of tasks is, as such, entirely dependent on the meaning the learner ascribes to the tasks. It may be the need to pass a course, boredom or a passion for language and, more often than not, entirely unrelated to the purpose assigned to the task by the teacher or task designer. A learner may engage with a task, but learner activity is never limited to tasks nor is it determined by the task. In this sense, it can be argued that participation understood as
learner activity involves a degree of intentionality. As such, participation in language learning tasks and learner activity is dependent on learner motivation and agency (cf. Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000).

2.2.2. Participation in discursive practices of the target community

In Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), the PM is used to discuss how Second Language learners participate in their learning/development to the extent that a re-construction of self takes place. The authors discuss how the PM allows us to think of learning as a process of becoming a member of a certain community which entails the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms (Sfard 1998: 6 cited in Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000: 155). The focus of this study is first person narratives of the language learning experience and, in particular, of migrants who have moved from their original language and culture into a new language and culture. More specifically, this study discusses narratives of participant experiences in the discursive practices of a new culture. In sum, participation in this specific analysis and discussion emerges as participation and interaction in discursive practices of a target community.²

A similar understanding of learning and participation as a process of access to a target community is at the basis of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) discussion of Legitimate peripheral participation whereby knowledge is gained through contact amongst learners and more knowledgeable peers. Through these interactions, learners progress from more peripheral participation in the target community whose knowledge base they aim to acquire towards a more central role in the community. The community which is considered by the learner to be the community in which the knowledge is situated is defined by Wenger (1998) as a “community of practice”.

There has been an attempt to build upon these two concepts of Legitimate Peripheral

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² My italics.
Participation and Communities of Practice in the language learning literature. It has been suggested, for example, that the community of practice in language learning which the language learner aims to belong to is that of the native speaker (e.g. Norton, 2001). It has also been argued (Firth and Wagner, 1997), however, that native speakers of the student’s target language are not necessarily the community to which the learner aspires to belong. Indeed, debate in the field of the Globalisation of English (e.g. Block and Cameron, 2002) and the development of the discussion around World Englishes (Jenkins, 2003; 2006) would indicate that there might be other communities to which language learners may aspire via the use of English as a Second Language but which are not represented by native speakers.

2.2.3 Participation as interaction with the environment

In his discussion of an Ecology of Language Learning from a socio-cultural perspective, van Lier (2000; 2004) discusses learner activity as interaction with the environment understood in the broadest of meanings. According to this view, learning is perceived as the learner’s ability to engage with the environment in relation to its “affordances”. An affordance is understood to be the relationship between a learner and the environment in terms of any opportunity for action (van Lier, 2004: 4). In other words, just as tasks can be seen as triggering learner activity as mentioned in Section 2.2.2, learner interaction with the environment can equally lead to the activation of “affordances” for learning. Furthermore, van Lier (2004) suggests that the participatory structures that are available to learners through their interactions when working with a PM of learning rather than with an AM are much greater suggesting a more creative and less predetermined view of what makes up the context for learning. For example, he argues (op. cit.) that it is through the learners’ multiple interactions, not only with experts, but also with peers, less capable peers and one’s own knowledge base that learning develops. In his

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3 In the Communicative Language Teaching approach to foreign language learning the term “target language” is commonly used to refer to the language the learner is learning. For example, in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English is considered to be the target language.
discussion of learner participation, van Lier’s *op.cit.* refers to the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Vygosky (1978: 86 cited in van Lier, 2004: 146) to describe the distance between a learner’s developmental level in independent learning and the potential level that can be reached through collaboration with more capable peers. However, in his discussion of participation from an ecological perspective, van Lier (*op. cit.*) argues for an understanding of the ZPD in an expanded sense that includes not only interaction with more capable peers as suggested in the original definition of the notion by Vygosky but as a multidimensional activity space as illustrated in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: An expanded ZPD (van Lier, 2004: 158).

In short, according to van Lier, participation structures for learning involve self-regulation across different types of interaction. Along similar lines, Ohta (2000: 76) argues that the nature of effective assistance in the ZPD is dependent on a number of factors such as the experience of the helper (whether “expert” or “peer”), the nature of the task, the goals of the participants, and the developmental levels of the participants.
Finally, this understanding of self-regulation at the core of all interaction in the classroom is at the basis of a theory of language learning as learner agency (van Lier, 2008).

2.3 Participation in language learning and teaching

In the previous sections of this chapter we have seen how the field of SLA slowly shifted from a focus on language and acquisition to a broader understanding of acquisition and learning that is better able to account for the learner in terms of his or her social interactions and cultural activities. In addition, the review of the debate in the field also indicates a broadening of the notion of context and the learning environment in SLA research. The following discussion of participation in relation to learner contributions as presented by Breen (2001b) can be seen as part of the development of a theory of learning that takes into account the learning story from the point of view of the learner. *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* by Breen (2001) provides examples of a sociocultural theory of language learning in practice and gathers research on learner affect and activity. In particular, Breen (2001b) provides a discussion of individual cognitive/affective learner contributions (Larsen-Freeman, 2001), learning strategies (Chamot, 2001), metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 2001), learner and research conceptualisations of the learner (Ellis, 2001), learners’ constructions of language teachers (Oxford, 2001), the distinction between overt participation and covert acquisition (Breen, 2001b), Activity Theory as a means of understanding learners as people (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001) and, last but not least, learner non-participation and imagined communities (Norton, 2001). Breen argues that the sum of learner contributions and their respective interactions as outlined by the various authors come together to create a certain outcome in terms of learner participation. In Figure 2.2 below, Breen (2001a: 9) illustrates how not only is learner activity and participation a result of movement from the self towards increasingly larger
contexts of self-expression, but it also involves transition from a previous condition of being to a new state.
Figure 2.2: The profile of learner contributions to language learning in Breen (2001a: 9).
2.3.1 Overt participation

Breen’s authored chapter (2001c) in the book is centred around the discussion of the distinction and the relationship between what he sees as being, on the one hand, “overt participation” or learner participation through discourse in the language classroom and, on the other, what he describes as “covert acquisition” or learning that takes place within the same context but which is less tangible or visible. According to Breen (2001c: 112), the first discussions in SLA of learner contributions to acquisition in terms of learner participation in discourse⁴ are to be found initially in Hatch (1978: 404 cited in Breen, 2001c) who claimed that language learning evolves out of learning to participate in conversations and reappear later in Long’s (1981 cited in Breen, 2001c: 113) definition of overt interaction. Breen (op. cit.) argues that the understanding of overt learner participation as interaction in discourse afforded by the second language classroom and its activities are at the basis of the theoretical and pedagogic rationales of Communicative Language Teaching (cf. Canale and Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981; Richards, 2006; Widdowson, 1978). Indeed, CLT makes use of specifically designed tasks to foster and maximise interaction in the target language among learners (e.g. Sullivan, 2000).

In an attempt to establish whether overt participation can contribute or not to second language acquisition, Breen (op. cit. pp. 114-115) discusses both the Interaction Hypothesis of language acquisition (Long, 1981) and the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995). According to the Interaction Hypothesis, the learner needs to participate overtly in interaction of a certain quality for acquisition/learning to occur. Furthermore, it is through the specific activity of negotiation for meaning (Long, 1996 and Pica, 1994 cited in Breen, 2001c) that learners can hone in on the most relevant issues for their learning. On the other hand, according to the Output Hypothesis as discussed by Swain

⁴ My italics.
learners can benefit from their own language output. Swain, as discussed by Breen (ibid.), identifies three major functions of learner output in addition to its contribution to fluency: the generation of linguistic content for the noticing of gaps or deficiencies in learner output, the testing of learner hypotheses and language awareness development. Breen (op. cit. p.118) argues, however, that neither hypothesis is fully capable of explaining how language may be acquired through classroom interaction in context as they omit to address the socio-affective dimension of language learning, particularly in the analysis of talk that occurs in the public space of the classroom or in the interpersonal space of task work. In other words, Breen argues (op. cit.) that research in the field of SLA based on the interaction and comprehensible output hypotheses only capture some of the classroom interactions that are relevant to acquiring language and, as such, it is hard to draw conclusive evidence from SLA studies about the impact these hypotheses have on acquisition.

**Participation as classroom talk**

Having concluded that SLA theories cannot provide an adequate view of participation, Breen (2001c) goes on to discuss the role of classroom talk and evidence of participation collected by classroom based research. Breen (op. cit.) discusses some of the dilemmas involved in attempting to claim that classroom interaction has an impact on acquisition. Building on some of the issues around Classroom Research raised by van Lier (1988; 1996) and Allwright (1989; 1996) for example, Breen points out that learner interaction in the classroom is heavily influenced by teacher interaction with learners and are often characterised by what Allwright (1989; 1996 cited in Breen, op. cit. p. 120) defines as a “discoursal dilemma” whereby classroom interactions reflect the constant tensions between the social and the pedagogical. Indeed, classroom talk, Breen explains (op. cit.), can be made up of different kinds of learner interactions. Some of them may be related to learning while others are more social in nature and it may be that
tasks are interpreted by learners in different ways. Teacher prompts may be interpreted and responded to by students with their own purposes in mind. Breen (op. cit.) thus argues with Allwright (1984 cited in Breen, 2001c) that, while overt interaction in a class may provide learning opportunities, different learners are likely to learn different things from it. This hypothesis, as Breen explains (2001c: 122), is supported by research into learner uptake of unknown vocabulary carried out by Slimani (1989; 1992) and Dobinson (1996) and research carried out by Day (1994) and Ely (1986). According to Breen (ibid.) this research suggests that there is no correlation between levels of learner participation understood as the quantity of classroom talk and acquisition. In particular, Slimani (1989; 1992 cited in Breen, 2001c) highlights that students who engage in less overt participation might actually be benefiting from the higher participation patterns of their peers. Furthermore, Slimani (1989; 1992 cited in Breen, 2001c) also suggests that those proficient students who tend to participate more overtly in the classroom may be taking on the burden of interactive work while not actually benefiting from it themselves for learning. Breen (2001c) thus concludes that there can be no presupposition of learning and acquisition based solely on overt learner participation.

**Tasks and learner participation**

Similarly to the role played by teachers, tasks are also viewed as having an impact on learner participation and interaction in the classroom. According to Breen (op. cit. p.124), classroom research focussed on learner-learner interaction fails to establish a direct link between task and acquisition. Furthermore, he argues (ibid.) that there is also an indication in the research that tasks may actually be used by students in ways that are not facilitative of acquisition (Musumeci, 1996; Higgs and Clifford, 1982; Seedhouse, 1999). Breen remarks (op. cit. p. 125) that it may be the case that learners interpret tasks differently to what teachers had intended (Block, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 1991) or they may learn different things depending on how they interpret the task (Kasanga, 1996;
Newton and Kennedy, 1996). Breen also highlights (op. cit. p. 125-126) the role played by a broader socio-affective perspective on task work in the classroom in revealing information that is missed by a focus on interaction alone (Coughlan and Duff, 1994; Platt and Brooks, 1994; Ohta, 1999). In his concluding remarks on the role of tasks in promoting overt participation, Breen (op. cit. p. 127) points to the importance of looking at the significance in context. In particular, he reminds us (op. cit. p. 126) of the need to take into account both the insider (i.e. emic) and outsider (i.e. etic) perspective when carrying out research into classroom interaction as also pointed out by Firth and Wagner (1997) and discussed above in Section 2.1.1. It is this attempt to contextualise interaction and to provide a deeper understanding of what is going on that leads Breen to call for a discussion of overt participation as discourse.

**Participation as classroom discourse**

Breen argues (2001c: 131) that learning a language in the company of others in a classroom inevitably involves participating, even silently, in social activity that is not simply a superficial frame for work on language data. According to Breen, social relationships in the classroom orchestrate what is available for learning, how learning is done and what is achieved. Thus, the relationship between the social and the pedagogical interactions of the classroom create the discourse of lessons. These, in turn, need to be viewed as a collective product of teachers and learners. Breen concludes by asserting that any explanation of how language is acquired in a classroom “must locate the process within the discourse of that class” (ibid.). In short, language “use” in the classroom is woven within the discourse of that classroom and, in the discourse of a classroom, the learners’ stance as learners makes it impossible to distinguish between “use” and “acquisition”. Indeed, he argues (ibid.) that one of the defining features of a

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5 Italics in Breen (2001).
6 My italics.
7 Italics in Breen (2001)
8 My italics.
classroom context is that “use” and “acquisition” co-occur within discourse in a mutually informing or dialectical process.

To conclude, Breen asserts (op. cit. p. 136) that a significant portion of participation is not overt as it is constrained and shaped by the learning contexts and that its surfacing within classroom discourse is dependent on many variables. However, the fact that participation is not overt or observable as discourse does not mean that learners are not continuously engaged in the discursive and social practices of the classroom which are relevant to their learning. Indeed, Breen suggests (ibid.) that further studies are needed which are able to capture instances of both explicit participation as determined by what learners do and say and implicit participation as determined by learners apparent inaction or silence. At a broader level, Breen states that another factor that may influence overt participation are the socio-political influences upon classroom discourse. This additional determining factor finds further support in the work by Norton (2001) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999 cited in Breen, 2001c).

2.3.2 Learner non-participation

Norton (2001) presents two case studies of immigrant learners who offer examples of non-participation in language learning (they both withdraw from the course for different reasons). In her discussion of non-participation, Norton draws on the work of Wenger (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1991) and their discussion of communities of practice whereby we not only define ourselves by the practices we engage in but also by those we do not engage in (Wenger, 1998: 164). In addition, she also points to (op. cit. p. 159) previous work in the field which has discussed forms of language learner resistance and non-participation in second language and foreign language classrooms (Canagarajah, 1993; Giltrow and Calhoun, 1992; Norton Pierce, Harper and Burnaby, 1993). The research presented in Norton discusses the learners’ non-participation in relation to their sense of belonging to specific imagined communities. The research conclusions suggest that learners’ sense of belonging can aid or hinder participation outcomes. The
implications for teaching and learning are that students might have to be prepared to change their sense of belonging to imagined communities for participation to occur. It becomes apparent in Norton’s study that there is a difference between learner engagement in classroom activities and participation. In the context of Norton’s study, it can be argued that, while the learners’ imagining did not prevent them from participating in classroom activities, ultimately it was their sense of belonging in imagined communities, and the conflict that arose from the teacher’s behaviour in relation to this imagining, that determined the learners’ decision to leave the course. In other words, students may be actively engaged in classroom activities but this is no guarantee of long term participation if the course does not work with nor acknowledge their imagined communities.

2.3.3 Participation and learner agency

In Lantolf and Pavlenko’s discussion (2001) of Second Language Acquisition as Second Language Activity based on Activity Theory (e.g. Engeström, 1987; 1999; Leont’ev, 1978; 1981; Wertsch, 1998), the authors discuss the need for any theory of learning to take into account the learner as a person including his or her beliefs and experiences about the world and learning. Through a thorough discussion of several case studies which include both examples of peripheral and full participation as discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and short-term and long-term participation, (as in the case of study abroad programmes, on the one hand, and in cases of migration to a new country, on the other), the authors show how learner histories, learner agency and context come together to produce certain learner specific outcomes in terms of access and participation within the communities that are seen to represent the target language and culture.

9 My Italics.
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Based on their review of the case studies, the authors argue that agency comes into play in two different ways. On the one hand, they highlight how agency is dependent on learner personal histories and motivation, and on the other, they point to the role played by context. The authors make the case (op. cit. p. 148), in particular, for a conceptualisation of agency as a relationship between the individual (the learner) and other individuals with whom he or she comes into contact including society at large. In this sense, the authors suggest (ibid.) that agency is a co-constructed phenomenon that is mediated through the relationship between learners and communities of practice (cf. Wenger, 1998). The authors specify (op. cit. p. 148) that the community can be an entity as broad as a society or culture, or as narrow as a particular language classroom.

2.3.4 Learning as changing participation

The case study of teacher-student f2f conferences by Young and Miller (2004) suggests an understanding of participation as co-participation involving not only the learner but also the teacher. The authors demonstrate how participation patterns of both the learner and the instructor in an ESL setting changed over time and in relation to the changes in the discursive practices of both parties. The study illustrates not only how the student’s participation changed in relation to her overall language development enabling her to go from peripheral to fuller participation in the teacher-student conferences, but also how the teacher’s participation changed in ways that complemented the student’s learning. Thus, the authors argue for an understanding of learning as changing participation.

2.3.5 Participation in the development of learning communities

In Breen (2001b), the term “learning community” is used both in relation to the classroom (i.e. Breen, 2001a; 2001c) and, more generally, to describe the broader context of learner interaction and participation such as the community of target language speakers as discussed in Norton (2001) and Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001). As far as the learning community of the classroom is concerned, Breen argues (2001c: 137)
that participation and the creation, development and establishment of a class and its culture are related, and that participation can be understood by capturing classroom discourse over time in longitudinal studies. The advantages of longitudinal studies of classroom interaction, are, according to Breen (ibid.), the ability to track, on the one hand, critical moments in which underlying social and discursive practices become more explicit and, on the other, to be able to observe the evolution of the culture of the class within which the teacher and the learners are framed. The importance of classroom discourse towards the establishment of a community of learners in the classroom is also highlighted in Hall (2002) and in Barnard and Torres-Guzmán’s (2009b) discussion of the creation of classroom communities of learning. In addition, both Hall (2002) and Barnard and Torres-Guzmán (2009a) illustrate the role played by the dynamics of classroom practice specifically, and by the relationships that develop between the teacher and the learners and among learners in the creation of classroom communities of learning.

A final distinction needs to be made between Breen’s (2001a; 2001c) understanding of a learning community and the discussion of learning in communities of practice as described by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) to which both Norton (2001) and Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) make explicit reference. According to Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) learning in communities of practice takes place as a process of gradual movement from peripheral to fuller participation as a result of learners’ interaction with expert peers as for example in the learning of a profession or trade. However, as pointed out in Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007), Breen (2001c), Hall (2002) and van Lier (2004), for example, the focus of interaction studies in the field of foreign language learning is very much on learners in the language classroom as they interact with their peers and fellow language learners. On the other hand, with reference to Norton (2001)’s discussion of participation in relation to the second language
learning of migrants and that of Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) in relation to individual histories, it can be argued that the L2 community can be viewed as the primary community to which the learner ultimately aims to belong or at least interact with and, as such, the learner’s relationship to that community may play an important role in determining the outcomes of learning. However, it may be the case in language learning in the foreign language classroom that the community which is of primary importance to the learner at the time is the classroom community rather than an abstract community of practice of target language users which resides physically – and, arguably, also mentally - outside of the classroom and the community of learners in that classroom.

2.4 A critical view of participation

The politics of participation in international English Education by Holliday (1997) discusses participation from the point of view of culture and power and introduces the concept of "discourse of participation" whereby he challenges our understanding of participation by looking at the way we refer to student behaviour in our professional language-teaching discourse. Holliday suggests (op. cit.) that the BANA (British, Australasian, North American) language teaching and learning methodology is imbued with certain Western dominant conceptualisations of participation as “active” participation which may not be relevant or appropriate in other contexts. In particular, Holliday discusses the dominant understanding of participation as it can be observed within the CLT tradition of ELT within BANA cultures. Holliday (1997: 411) describes this attitude as:

The "good student" participates orally in the target language (L2); and the "good lesson" is one in which each student has a maximum share of this participation. This follows so-called "communicative", "learner-centred" principles in which students are to achieve maximum opportunity to practice the language
Chapter 2 – Participation in Language Learning and Teaching


He continues by providing examples of typical language learning classrooms from non-BANA contexts and warns us of the dangers of taking the BANA view of participation according to which those students who are not visibly “active” are necessarily passive and not participating in the learner process. Holliday also goes on to discuss the role played by the teacher in determining the nature and extent of learner oral participation in the language lesson. For example, Holliday questions the typical strategy of many CLT classrooms of teacher “eliciting” information from students as a way of leading oral contributions. The question thus arises, I would argue, of whether “contrived” or “orchestrated” participation is equal to participation which is somehow more self-determined or spontaneous. Indeed, Holliday (op. cit. p. 411) questions the relationship between the physical layout of desks and student seating in typical language learning classrooms in determining participation and he argues that certain set-ups may lead to learners feeling more exposed and as such less likely to contribute in terms of oral participation. Similar concerns about Western dominant values within the CLT approach are also expressed by Sullivan (2000). In her study of communicative language teaching in Vietnam from a socio-cultural perspective, Sullivan (op. cit.) highlights how pair work and group work activities - which make up so much of the CLT approach to classroom language instruction in the West and in North America - are often unproductive in a non-Western context. In learning contexts which are based on Confucian values, such as Vietnam, for example, participation is seen more as an activity involving all members of the classroom together rather than in terms of individual contributions.

Holliday concludes his discussion (op. cit.) by suggesting the need for both a pluralistic approach towards understanding participation and the establishment of standards which
enable teachers to tailor their classroom discourses to account for other forms of participation when it is locally or contextually appropriate to do so. To conclude, Holliday calls for (op.cit. p. 416) further exploration of participation within the field of Critical Linguistics and in relation to a discussion of discourse, power and social context (Fairclough, 1989). As we have seen above, others in the field have also attempted to take a critical look at the contexts in which learner participation plays out such as Norton (2001), Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), Block and Cameron (2002) and Jenkins (2006). Van Lier (2004) also makes a contribution to the debate in his discussion of Critical Ecological Linguistics as a field of Educational Linguistics and endorses some of the concerns expressed by Holliday above in relation to participation (op. cit. p. 191). In particular, van Lier (op. cit. p. 190) highlights the importance of the three key components in critical classroom work of awareness, autonomy and authenticity in providing a pedagogy which is truly transformative. According to van Lier (ibid.), it is through pedagogical processes which allow for learners to develop an understanding about language, language use and learning and how these relate to their own situations that learners are able to develop their own voice and identity thus leading to language use that is truly authentic.

### 2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the emergence of participation as a metaphor for learning and of the impact this has had on debate and theory development over the last 15 years in the field of SLA, Applied Linguistics and language teaching practices. I have attempted to illustrate how the establishment of Sociocultural theory in language learning brought about by this new focus has led to a general broadening of the field and to greater attention in the research agenda being paid to issues concerning the affective and social dimension of learning. Additional factors which can be seen to trigger or hinder participation and which have emerged from the review of the literature
into participation are tasks, teacher behaviour, the learning context and encounters with others (peers, teachers, speakers of the target language). Participation has been discussed, in the main, in terms of learner activity and overt and observable learner interaction in the target language as prompted by the tasks of the Communicative Language Teaching classroom and as moments of less observable, private or individual or collective resistance to culturally determined forms of participation. Furthermore, Breen (2001b; 2001c) and Holliday (1997) both warn against a reading of overt participation or observable oral participation as the only form of participation. Just because overt participation is easier to observe and quantify does not mean that other forms of participation which are equally as valid are not taking place. In this sense, classroom talk is only one of the aspects of the broader context of classroom discourse and cannot be taken at face value as an indication of participation. In conclusion, there is a general call (i.e. Breen, 2001b, Holliday, 1997; van Lier, 2004) for studies and understandings that go beyond the surface and which are able to question our daily classroom routines, practices and discourse. The following chapter will take a look at how participation is understood and discussed within the online learning literature in general and within CMC in CALL in particular.
Chapter 3 Participation in online learning and CALL

"…online participation underlies online learning in a more powerful way than any other variable we are currently aware of. Consequently, if we are to understand online learning, we need a learning theory that views online learning as online participation." Hrastinski (2009: 78)

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the notion of participation in online learning in general and in the field of CALL in particular. The first section of this chapter will attempt to explain the emergence of participation as a focus of interest in the literature in the field of online learning. The second section will then look at how participation has been discussed and conceptualised in the CALL and CMC literature in language learning (CMCL). The final section is devoted more specifically to a discussion of participation in relation to language learning in virtual worlds.

With the development of technology, language learning and teaching has also moved to technology enhanced settings (e.g. Bax, 2003; Beatty, 2003; Chapelle, 1997; 2001; 2003; Felix, 2003; Herring, 1996; Levy, 1997; Warschauer, 1997; Warschauer and Healy, 1998; Warschauer and Kern, 2006) and the areas of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Telecollaboration (e.g. Belz, 2003; O’Dowd; 2000; 2006; Dooley and O’Dowd 2012; Guth and Helm 2010; Hauck and Youngs, 2008; Warschauer, 1996) have become well established within CALL (e.g. Lafford and Lafford, 2005; Hampel and Hauck, 2006; Hubbard, 2009a; 2009b; Kern, 2006; Lamy and Hampel, 2007; Levy and Stockwell, 2006; Thorne and Black, 2007). In addition, while much of the literature on learner interaction and participation in CALL focuses to a large extent on learner participation and interaction in text-based environments (e.g. Beauvois 1992;
Along similar lines to the argument made by socio-cultural theories of language learning in face-to-face (f2f) instructional contexts illustrated in Chapter 2, Bento and Schuster (2003) discuss the rise of participation in online learning as a result of the emergence of the transformation of knowledge paradigm in f2f educational contexts. However, the authors highlight (op.cit.: p. 156-157) how, in online learning contexts where there is little or no f2f interaction with students, understanding and encouraging learner participation is even more of an educational challenge. Hrastinski (2007)
provides an extended theoretical discussion for the framing of research into participation in online learning based on socio-cultural theories of learning (e.g. Säljö, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978 and Wenger, 1998) and closely related to constructivist theories of learning as discussed in Duffy and Jonassen (1992) and Säljö (2000) according to which the learner plays an active role in his or her learning. This theoretical framing of the discussion of participation in online learning is also taken up by Jaldemark, Lindberg and Olofsson (2005) and Jaldemark (2010). From a theoretical perspective, both of these works bring together the ecological, socio-cultural and socio-constructivist perspective in discussing participation. This specific framing of the research into participation in online education is in line with current debate in SLA and the Socio-cultural theory of learning discussed in Chapter 2.

In their attempt to provide a clearer understanding of what is meant by participation in online asynchronous communication contexts such as discussion boards, Bento and Schuster (2003) provide a discussion of the types of interaction that are possible in distance education according to Moore (1989). These are learner-content, instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction.\(^1\) Based on these distinctions of interaction in distance education, the authors go on to provide a taxonomy of participation which allows for a discussion of the difference between *high visibility participation* and *low visibility participation*.\(^2\) The authors suggest a taxonomy of 4 main participation behaviours which are represented in a quadrant diagram relating learner interpersonal interaction (i.e. interaction with others) and learner interaction with content. Indeed, the authors argue for the need to distinguish between social interaction, on the one hand, and interaction with course content and learning tasks on the other. This quadrant displayed in Figure 3.1 below enables the categorisation of students according to

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\(^1\) These types of interaction are developed further by Anderson and Garrison (1998 cited in Hrastinski, 2007) who added three more types: teacher-content, teacher-teacher and content-content interaction.

\(^2\) My Italics.
different behaviours and the uncovering of quality issues in relation to learner participation.

Figure 3.1: Taxonomy of participation in online courses (Bento and Schuster, 2003: 160).

The Quadrant is explained by the authors as follows: Students in Q1 (Missing in action) are those students who do not access the course materials and do not interact with other members of the course. The learners in Q2 (Witness learners) are learners who interact with content but who do not interact with others although they may be aware of the discussions going on, for example. In Q3 are the learners (Social participants) who engage socially with other members of the course but who do not interact significantly
with content. Q4 represents those students (Active learners) who, according to the authors (op. cit.) score high in terms of both interaction with content and interpersonal interaction. Building on debate in the field of online collaboration (Kemery, 2000) and on studies of team skills in f2f contexts of collaboration (McShane and Von Glinow, 2000; Whetten and Cameron, 1998), the authors see learners in this quadrant as not only contributing to the task but also as building and sustaining relationships in the learning community (op. cit. p. 162). The authors also point out that students may occupy different quadrants at different times during the course.

According to the authors (op. cit.: 163), the representation of participation as described above is also seen as playing a central role in helping teachers increase learners’ awareness of their good or bad participation strategies. Indeed, the implication of applying the quadrant to examine learner behaviour is that teachers can uncover unproductive participation and help learners change their participation patterns. It is often the case, for example, that students who are very active socially do not understand why they may have scored a low grade in the course as they have mistakenly confused social participation with interaction with content. The quadrant provides a means of distinguishing between social participation and deep learning. However, I would like to suggest that the distinction between "social participants" and "active learners" as suggested by Bento and Schuster may actually not be as crucial in language learning and teaching as social interaction via use of the target language often coincides with interaction with course content making the distinction between the two types of interaction problematic. Indeed, for example, in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1991; Widdowson, 1978) and in the Task Based Language Teaching approach (TBLT) (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989; 2004) where language learning is perceived as taking place through collaboration and social interaction in the classroom via the target language, it can be argued that learner
participation in language learning can be seen simultaneously as both social interaction and interaction with content.

The online learning literature, however, also points to the need to problematise the notion of “social” and the role it plays in discussing participation in online learning. For example, Hrastinski (2007: 20), building on Wenger (1998), argues for the need to think of participation as more than just conversations with others. It may be, for example, that learners see or perceive themselves as participating while there is no outward or “socially” evident instance of their participation and that their participation be connected rather to an individual and personal sense of belonging and feeling. Jaldemark (2008) also discusses the importance of individual work and contributions for learners engaged in discussions around learning in online educational settings. Jaldemark’s research (2008) indicates that while students accepted and participated in online collaborative activities as part of the online course they were enrolled in, they also highly valued the fact that they were able to make individual contributions and that they were individually responsible for their own work thus clearly placing the onus of learning on the individual.

3.1.1 Defining online participation

Another significant and more recent contribution to the debate on participation in online learning is the work by Hrastinski (2008). As with Bento and Schuster (2003), Hrastinski’s research in the field of organisational and management learning provides a useful analytical framework transferable to other research fields such as online language learning. Hrastinski (op. cit.) examines participation in terms of learner contributions in writing within educational platforms. Based on his review of the literature, Hrastinski (2008: para. 8) argues that participation can take place on different levels.
Table 3.1: Summary of Hrastinski’s (2008) literature review on studies of online learner participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Unit of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Participation as accessing e-learning environments</td>
<td>At this level of conceptualisation, participation is measured in terms of the number of times students access the e-learning environment.</td>
<td>The number of system accesses or logins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participation as writing</td>
<td>Participation is measured on the number of written messages and the length of learner contributions.</td>
<td>The number of messages written and length of messages or units.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Participation as quality writing</td>
<td>At this level a distinction is made between learner written comments of high quality and low quality based on quality categories devised by the researcher analysing learner comments within the specific context. For example, Davidson-Shivers, Muilenberg, and Tanner (2001) and Lipponen et al. (2002) compare on-topic and off-topic messages and Bullen (1998) attempts to assess levels of critical thinking in messages.³</td>
<td>Message or unit quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Participation as writing and reading</td>
<td>Where computer platforms are able to capture learner reading activity, participation can also be measured in terms of how many posts have been read as well as the number of written messages or contributions</td>
<td>Number of messages read</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ All of these authors are cited in Hrastinski (2008).
Participation as actual and perceived writing

The papers reviewed by Hrastinski (2008) that appear in this level also take into account learner perceptions about the extent to which the number of written messages was useful to them as learners.

Learner perceptions about the usefulness of the writing activity; learner perceptions about time spent on the platform.

Participation as taking part and joining in a dialogue.

At this level, participation takes into account not only the learners’ behaviour in terms of the number or posts written and read but also in terms of their feelings of joining in and taking part in a dialogue (Vonderwell and Zachariah, 2005 cited in Hrastinski, 2008). Hrastinski (ibid.) also points out that the majority of research articles into learner online participation post 2005 start to question the validity of a discussion of participation in terms of quantity of activity only, opening up the way for research frameworks that are able to capture more of the qualitative and nuanced aspects of participation.

Learner perceptions

As we can see from the levels listed above, writing is examined quantitatively both in terms of quantity of posts and length. However, I would argue that, unless we know what the student is writing about or “how” they are writing, the activity of writing cannot tell us much at all about learner participation and its relation to learning. It may
also be the case that the activity of writing is related to a reading activity. As such, I would suggest that the learning value of a simple act of writing that does not reflect other types of activities or forms of participation within the educational platforms is actually limited. Knowledge about learner perceptions about writing activities may, on the other hand, provide additional information that can assist in contextualising learner participation and giving it a specific meaning. This meaning may go beyond the specific task completion and be relevant to the student’s sense of belonging and being part of a dialogue. In other words, a written post may have a social aim. Last but not least, the unit of analysis “Time spent in the platform” does not necessarily tell us much unless we are able to learn what activities in particular the learner was engaged in while in the platform. Furthermore, this level totally fails to capture student activity outside of the platform which may be just as relevant to learner participation in other ways. For example, Hrastinski (op. cit.) mentions that the activity of reading which may take place offline may be seen as impacting on learner writing in the online forum.

In conclusion, Hrastinski (2008) argues for a conceptualisation of participation as a complex phenomenon and suggests that other ways of participating be taken into consideration in future research. In particular, he refers to the need to include social perspectives on participation and learning as advocated by Wenger (1998) and according to whom participation is to be understood as a complex process that combines doing, thinking, feeling and belonging (Wenger, 1998: 57). Hrastinski (2008: np) sums up his discussion and review of the literature by saying:

Online learner participation is a process of learning by taking part and maintaining relations with others. It is a complex process comprising doing, communicating, feeling and belonging, which occurs both online and offline (Hrastinski, 2008: np).
Intimately linked to Hrastinski’s definition of participation is what he defines as the learners’ “sense of community” or their feeling of belonging and being attached to a group (Hrastinski, 2007: 21). In particular, he advocates (ibid.) that participating in and feeling attached to a group are mutually reinforcing processes and, as a result, the importance of group attachment is a factor that should not be overlooked when evaluating online learner participation.

Finally, based on his review of the online learning literature, Hrastinski’s (2007) provides a model of participation which identifies three main factors influencing participation. They are demographic factors, behavioural factors and contextual factors and are represented in Figure 3.2 below.

**Figure 3.2:** A model of online student participation and influencing factors (Hrastinski, 2007: 106).
3.1.2 Participation as learning

Elsewhere (2009), Hrastinski goes onto develop a discussion of the relationship of online learning and online participation. Here he argues that participation and learning are inseparable and jointly constituting making the case for a theory of online learning as online participation as also suggested by Salmon (2011). He states that participation is a condition for learning and provides a framework in which to discuss participation and learning as two sides of the same coin. In his review of empirical studies into participation as learning, learning is measured through perceived learning, grades and quality of student performance and assignments. It is argued by Hrastinski (2009: 78) that "...online participation underlies online learning in a more powerful way than any other variable we are currently aware of. Consequently, if we are to understand online learning, we need a learning theory that views online learning as online participation."

Indeed, if this is the case of education in general, it is even more so for communicative language learning where learning is through speaking and communication with others (i.e. linguistic or verbal participation) and where it does not make sense to discuss one without the other as discussed in Chapter 2.

Last but not least, Hrastinski (2009) argues that developing a theory of online learning as online participation has implications for design (cf. also Wenger 1998 for a discussion of participation and design). This is in line with the finding of Jaldemark (2008) which lists tasks as having an impact on learner participation. In Jaldemark’s (2008; 2010) case study of teacher trainees in an online course, learner participation is discussed in relation to the participants’ written utterances as they engaged in various individual and collaborative tasks. In this study, two different genres of communication emerged: a teacher-centred one and a learner-centred one. The analysis led the author to conclude (Jaldemark, 2008: 143) that online exchanges include similar communicative patterns as f2f classroom communication and that learner participation in online
educational settings is equally as dependent on the participants, the tasks they are required to complete, the roles they adopt to complete the tasks and the constraints of the specific learning management system in use.

### 3.2 Participation in CMCL

A similar focus on learner interaction via text-based communication as discussed above by Hrastinski (2007; 2008) can be found in the CMC literature in CALL as well and is discussed in some detail in this section. Indeed, the first forms of learner interaction with CMC technology were predominantly text-based (Lamy and Hampel, 2007: 37). With technological developments, the research literature has broadened its focus to include discussions, evaluations and explorations of technologies that allow for oral, aural and visual communication as well (cf. Stockwell, 2007). For example, oral and visual communication is supported in video-conferencing platforms (e.g. Skype and Blackboard), audio-graphic conferencing platforms (e.g. Lyceum and Blackboard) and in audio blogs such as VoiceThread. In addition, most platforms nowadays also allow for multimodal student interaction whereby users can communicate using different communicative channels such as written text, voice and visual channels within the main Learning Management Systems both synchronously and asynchronously. Many educational institutions are also making use of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Flickr) including virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life) as platforms for the implementation of course delivery and learner interaction thus contributing to the opening up of even more combinations of channels and modes for learner communication.

#### 3.2.1 Participation as online learner discourse

Hubbard (2009b: 10) argues that there is natural connection between the human-human interaction through CMC and the findings from studies of f2f interaction in SLA making CMC environments a logical place for researchers to explore the similarities,
differences and added value of both contexts. In his comparative study of discourse and learner participation in both a f2f context and in an online synchronous discussion forum, Fitze (2006) indicates the lack of aural and visual paralinguistic cues of f2f classroom interaction as being a fundamental distinction between the two contexts and one which may impact positively on learner participation. The graphic-only\(^4\) form of communication (reading and writing) of written electronic conferences means that all paralinguistic information (e.g. body movements and learners’ orientation to the discourse such as agreement or disagreement) has to be interpreted and expressed graphically (Fitze, op. cit.: p. 68). Building on Warschauer (1996) and Ortega (1997), Fitze (op. cit.) provides a comparative study between two groups of students’ classroom participation and their participation in an online synchronous discussion forum. This study measures participation as the number of words produced by students in both contexts and the lexical range displayed under controlled conditions and equal time. The study discusses outcomes in terms of participation in particular with reference to the following categories: Amount of Discourse (number of words), Lexical Range, Interactive Competence (social and communicative strategies), Equality of Participation (in both f2f and in the online discussions). While the study indicates that there is no statistical difference in the amount of discourse used in both contexts, there is a wider lexical range displayed in the online discussions. The author suggests that the equal amount of discourse produced in both contexts may be explained inline with previous research (e.g. Beauvois, 1992, 1998; Kelm, 1992) that indicates that while writing may take longer than speaking it is also true that the written medium of discussion of chat rooms also allows for students not to have to take temporally sequential turns thus speeding up the process of communication in general. As far as an increase in lexical range is concerned, Fitze remarks in line with previous research (e.g. Warschauer,

\(^4\) Italics in Fitze (2006).
1996) that learners needed to resort to discourse to a greater extent in the online
discussion as a way of compensating for the lack of physical cues and communication
of f2f interaction. The study concludes that the groups displayed different participation
patterns in terms of equality of participation in the two different contexts with one
group demonstrating more balanced participation irrespective of the context (online or
f2f). Fitze (op. cit.) observed that other factors (group dynamics, proficiency levels and
personality types) might need to be taken into account when comparing f2f and
electronic discussions in similar contexts.

3.2.2 Balanced participation

Research has underlined how the use of online text-based discussion forums contributes
to the creation of more equal or balanced participation among students (e.g. Beauvois,
1992; Bohlke, 2003; Chun, 1994; Claro, 2009; Fitze, 2006; Kelm, 1992; Sullivan and
Pratt, 1996; Tella, 1992; Warschauer, 1996). The term *more balanced* participation is
understood to mean that participation tends to be more equally distributed among
participants and discussions are not dominated by a few participants only (Fitze, 2006:
69). For example, Fitze (*ibid.*) refers to studies by Marjanovic (1999) and Sullivan
(1998) who observed that the anonymity of the network could empower second
language students to participate more fully in discussions with native speakers as they
felt that they were defined by their communicative skills rather than their race or native
language background. More generally, others (e.g. Beauvois, 1992, 1998; Bohlke, 2003;
Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995 as cited in Fitze, 2006: 69) have reported more
balanced participation in electronic conferences as opposed to f2f. For example, it is
noted (Kelm, 1992 and Beauvois 1992 and 1998 cited in Fitze, 2006: 69) that balanced
participation in written electronic conferences is due to the lack of consecutive turn-
taking patterns of f2f interactions. In other words, students do not have to wait for

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5 Italics in Fitze (2006).
others to finish speaking before they can start writing. In addition, it may be the case that students have more time to compose and evaluate their contributions in the midst of interaction thus reducing the fear of interruption or failure less orally fluent students experience in oral exercises (Beauvois 1992; 1998; Kelm, 1992 cited in Fitze, 2006; 69). Finally, from a broader perspective, it can also be argued that the fact that in some written electronic interactions it is impossible to distinguish social status and position cues such as gender, race, ethnic background or socio-economic status (Hayne, Rice and Licker, 1994; Marjanovic, 1999; Selfe and Meyer, 1991; Sullivan, 1998; all cited in Fitze, 2006: 68) may also lead to a more democratic communicative context where learners may feel less constrained in their interaction on a number of levels. However, it has also been noted (e.g. Claro, 2009; Hubbard, 2009b) that many of the studies of language learner discourse online tend to be comparative whereby student interaction online is compared to f2f classroom interaction. In general these studies make use of controlled and replication study conditions rather than attempting to explore the affordances of the specific contexts. In addition, for example, there is very limited discussion in the literature as to what happens to those students who participate less online compared to f2f. Could it be the case that rather than equalising participation for some, online discussion forums are actually limiting participation and learning for some learners while privileging participatory preferences or strengths of others (cf. Claro, 2009)?

3.2.3 Participation as communicative competence

Closely related to the notion of balanced participation is that of communicative competence in written electronic environments. Researchers (Chun 1994; Perkins and Newman, 1999 both cited in Fitze, 2006) point to how the skills and strategies for communication in online electronic fora are different to those required for f2f interaction. For example, students’ typing skills may have a bearing on online
communication in discussion forums (Ortega, 1997). Indeed, it would be interesting to know what happens, for example, to those participants who are not as proficient in keyboard skills and who rely more heavily on the physical features of f2f communication (cf. Bohlke, 2003 cited in Claro, 2009: 5). Chun (1994 cited in Fitze, 2006: 68) found that second language learners displayed more interactive competence in written electronic conferences in comparison with students in f2f contexts. According to Chun (1994), speech acts employed in greetings and leave-takings, constructing and expanding on topics, turn taking, capturing attention, steering or avoiding topics, starting and ending conversations, asking for confirmation or clarification, apologizing and providing feedback are all components of interactive competence. Chun’s finding (1994) is, according to Fitze (2006), inline with the findings of other researchers (e.g. Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Sotillo, 2000; Sullivan and Pratt, 1996). Furthermore, Slatin’s study (1998 cited in Fitze, 2006) indicates how, even at the initial phases of foreign language learning, students make more of the higher order communications as suggested by Chun (1994) above. However, it could also be argued that in written electronic media, students' interactive competence is simply made more verbally and graphically visible by the nature of the medium. In other words, it might well be that students are equally competent in f2f interaction but that this competence is delivered nonverbally and, as such, it is not visible in linguistic terms or from a discourse analysis perspective.

Building on Chun (1994) and Erben (1999), Lamy’s study (2004) of language-learner oral competence within online audio-graphic conferencing and synchronous CMC indicates that the strategies required of students are specific to the platform and include group and task management skills. More specifically, Lamy (op.cit.) uses an analytical framework of 4 competence types to analyse learner-learner oral conversations in the platform and learner interactions with the communicative features of the platform.
These are: 1) linguistic-functional; 2) socio-cultural; 3) institutional and 4) environmental. The linguistic-functional competence refers to the student’s appropriate use of the target language both in terms of linguistic competence and interactional competence as discussed by Chun (1994 cited in Fitze, 2006) above. Lamy (op. cit.) also discusses competence in this category as the combination of the learner’s content knowledge and procedural knowledge. The socio-cultural competence is used to describe the learner’s ability to interact in culturally and socially appropriate ways with reference to the learning and social context. For example, this may mean displaying interactional awareness of social differences in the group through the use of formal forms of address or the ability to take leadership of a task in a culturally sensitive way. Institutional competence refers to the learners’ ability to distinguish between instances of conversation which are related to the context of formal learning and those which may be related to other spheres such as the domestic. For example, a learner may demonstrate this awareness by talking about the fact that her phone is ringing in her home environment and that she needs to answer it. The final type is environmental competence that is measured by the learner’s use of the tools of the environment in support of communication and their ability to declare this knowledge when to do so facilitates communication. An example of environmental knowledge would be an offer of support to a peer in helping them overcome a technical problem.

To conclude this section on learner communicative competence, it could be argued more generally that the dynamics of many online platforms and tasks devised within those platforms place a greater onus upon learners compared to interaction in f2f contexts in terms of the strategies they are required to deploy in the interest of successful communication and learning. In addition, the discussion in this section suggests that there may also be different types of competences required depending on the mode of communication (i.e. oral or written). The question thus arises as to what
extent some students may be disadvantaged in their online participation by the increased number of competences they are expected to display.

3.2.4 Participation in multimodal contexts

As highlighted in the previous section, learner interaction in CMC contexts may also involve the use of more than one channel or mode of communication. These modes are not limited to writing or audio (speaking and listening) as discussed above. Indeed, videoconferencing platforms such as the freely available online application Skype, and the more recent applications of the learning management system Blackboard, to name just two, also provide for video communication between users. Blackboard, for example, in addition to video, audio and text-chat also allows users to share documents within the platform. Most of these platforms also allow for the combination of more than one mode of communication simultaneously. Other CMC platforms that allow for multimodal communication, for example, are voiceblogs such as Voicethread. In this type of asynchronous CMC tool, users can post voice messages, visual materials and written documents for others to view and comment on orally (e.g. Meskill and Anthony, 2010). In addition, users in these platforms may decide which communication channels to use and how many of them to use at the same time. It also needs to be borne in mind that the different modes of communication that are available to users will also play a role in shaping learner interaction within the platform (Lamy and Hampel, 2007). For example, in video-conferencing contexts, visual and facial cues which were lacking in online written interactions of discussion boards are no longer absent from the learner interactions, thus arguably challenging the definition of online learner interaction as discussed with reference to the written communication contexts of discussion boards discussed in the previous sections and in particular in Fitze (2006).

It is with the use of audio-graphic conferencing platforms in particular, however, that the initial discussion of multimodality in CMCL has been framed (Ciekanski and
Chanier, 2008: Hampel, 2003; 2006; Hampel et al., 2005; Hampel and Hauck, 2004; 2006; Hauck, 2010; Lamy, 2004; Lamy and Hampel, 2007; Wang, 2004). Audio- graphic conferencing platforms allow for participants to communicate primarily via oral conversations and to share visual or graphic information via the same application. Compared to other multimodal environments such as video-conferencing, the visual and paralinguistic cues of f2f communication are lacking and the interaction is driven by oral production and supported in writing or with graphics as illustrated in Figure 3.3 below.

Figure 3.3: Screenshot of the audio-conferencing platform Lyceum showing the voice-conferencing facility, the on-screen Whiteboard and the text-chat embedded into the application (Hauck and Youngs, 2008: 107).
Indeed, Lamy and Hampel (2007: 37), in their discussion of modes and multimodality in CMCL, declare:

“Language is not the only semiotic mode at our disposal. Representational systems go beyond written and spoken language to include images; and even written text includes visual aspects (e.g. layout, font, colour). Thus we communicate using a complex system made up of written, spoken and visual resources, each with it own modes and affordances.” (Lamy and Hampel, 2007: 37)

If applied to audiographic conferencing, the above discussion of multimodality means dealing with the simultaneous existence of visual modes (graphics), verbal modes (writing, text chat) and the acoustic mode all in one medium (Hampel, 2003: 25).

Lamy’s research (2004) of multimodality in the audiographic environment Lyceum provides an analysis of learner participation as the combined use of audio channels, visual and “actional” channels, i.e. channels through which participants can interact non-linguistically with the environment and its tools. Building on Batstone (2002) and Jewitt et al. (2001), Lamy (op. cit.) highlights the importance of taking into account non-linguistic features and forms of interaction in CMC communication such as the students’ use of the environment and computer mediated tools. In short, Lamy’s discussion (2004) of oral communication in synchronous online environments indicates that there is more to student oral communication than online learner linguistic discourse.

In discussing the importance of taking into consideration additional semiotic features alongside the learner’s use of the target language, Lamy (2004) argues for a new approach to understanding online learner communication. The key characteristics of

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6 Hampel (2003) defines as verbal modes only written text. In my discussion of multimodality in virtual worlds, however, I follow the distinction made by Wigham and Chanier (2013) of verbal communication which includes both written text and oral text and non-verbal communication as all forms of non-linguistic communication.

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multimodality that emerge from a reading of Lamy in relation to learner online interaction, communication and language learning are:

- there is more than one channel of communication (e.g. audio, visual, written text);
- there are channels of non-linguistic communication (e.g. visual and “actional”);
- when analysing learner online interactions, it does not make sense to discuss linguistic communication without taking into account the other modes of communication.

Following a definition of multimodality by Jewitt et al. (2001: 6 cited in Lamy, 2004: 524) as the *ensemble of multiple modes of communication*7 that occur in f2f communication (e.g. speaking combined with facial expressions and gestures), I would like to conclude this section by arguing that learner participation within multimodal online contexts needs to be understood as a unique form of communication that cannot be defined in relation to linguistic or verbal interaction alone.

### 3.2.5 Participation as online communication

Ciekanski and Chanier (2008: 163) argue that, if communication, whether occurring f2f or online, is always multimodal, in the online situation the computer medium has an impact not only on the types of modes involved but also on the nature of what online communication is. Indeed, we have seen how participation has developed in the discussion from written interaction in the target language to include a combination of written and oral discourse which is embedded within the context of online environment in which it takes place to such an extent that it cannot be fully interpreted nor played out without reference to the visual and graphically representational medium (*cf.* also Felix, 2005; Flewitt *et al.*, 2009; Wang, 2004). In this sense, it can be argued that it is appropriate to think of participation in the context of online foreign and second

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7 My italics.
language learning not only as online learner interaction in the target language but as part of a broader communicative process that includes learner manipulation of the visual and graphic features of the online environment and leads to an understanding of participation in a more general sense as *online communication* \(^8\) (Ciekanski and Chanier, 2008; Lamy, 2004; Lamy and Hampel 2007). In short, online communication involves more than online learner interaction in the target language. This is also in line with Hrastkinki (2009), who warns us of equating participation only with talking and writing to the detriment of other areas of participation to which he is referring such as the social and the personal. Finally, I would argue that the greater the potential of the environment for non-verbal interactivity, the greater the salience of non-verbal communication in understanding participation within that specific environment.

### 3.3 Participation in virtual worlds

This final section moves the discussion on multimodality a step further by looking at how learners not only participate through the environment or medium but they do so by becoming visually and graphically part of the environment. The discussion in this section is informed mainly by literature from CMCL and, where relevant, by debate in the general virtual world literature. The discussion is informed by research and studies that look at learner interaction in the environment in terms of linguistic interaction on the one hand (Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009b; Peterson, 2010; Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2013; Zheng *et al.*, 2009) and in terms of learner activity (e.g. Bignell and Parson, 2010; Cheney and Sanders, 2011; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Huang, Rauch and Liaw, 2010; Lim, 2009; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Ritke-Jones, 2010) and learner affect (e.g. Leong, 2011; Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010; Molka-Danielsen, Panichi and Deutschmann, 2010; Schwienhorst 2009) on the other. In addition, there are also a

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\(^8\) My Italics.
certain number of studies that discuss learner participation and interaction in the environment from the point of view of task design (Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi 2011; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Jauregi et al., 2011; Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi, 2010; Peterson, 2012b). Finally, I would like to argue that, while only one study explicitly discusses participation in terms of multimodal communication (i.e. Whigham and Chanier, 2013), it makes sense to read this entire section against the backdrop of multimodality as illustrated in the previous section. In other words, virtual worlds are a multimodal platform by definition.

3.3.1 Affordances of virtual worlds for language learning

Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen (2010) discuss participation and language learning in virtual worlds from an ecological perspective (cf. van Lier, 2004; Kramsch, 2008) according to which the learner interacts not only through the environment but becomes part of the environment. The ecological model sees systems as open, complex and adaptive comprising elements that are dynamic and interdependent. According to this model, all learning is situated in an environment and is as such contextualised. In this view of learning, for example, the learner is not only part of the environment but also one of the variables in determining subject matter (the target language content) and the outcome of learning and teaching. In an ecological perspective, and in line with sociocultural theory, people and the learning community are also constituent features of the environment and levels of engagement are dependent upon meaningful participation in human events involving perception, action and joint construction of meaning. Furthermore, in collaborative learning setups as in the case of the communicative language teaching approaches, communication skills are of primary importance and central to engagement. The authors suggest that, in highly complex communicative environments such as virtual worlds, learners need to be equipped not only with the technical but also the participatory communicative skills – be they social, linguistic,
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pragmatic and/or intercultural – so that they may engage more effectively with the specific environment. As part of this argument, the authors (op. cit.: pp. 174-176) identify 4 key affordances of the virtual world of Second Life that may have an impact on participation and collaborative language learning. They are: “sense of place” discussed as user’s perception of the 3D environment, collaborative building features, openness of the world to other users and representation of self via an avatar. All of these virtual world characteristics offer significant language and intercultural learning opportunities to the foreign language student.

3.3.2 Participation as doing

Some of the literature describes learner participation in terms of activity within the virtual world (e.g. Bignell and Parson, 2010; Cheney and Sanders, 2011; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Huang, Rauch and Liaw, 2010; Lim, 2009; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Ritke-Jones, 2010). The following list is a compilation based on this literature. According to this review, learners participate in virtual world learning activities through:

• exploration
• experimenting
• experiencing
• searching for information
• belonging
• collaboration
• social interaction and communication
• being (learning that results from exploration of self and identity as discussed in Lim, 2009)
• building
• championing (i.e. promotion of real life causes such as charities as discussed in Lim, 2009)
• expressing (communicating about virtual world experiences outside of the virtual world platform as discussed by Lim, 2009)
• doing
• sharing
• acting, performing, role play and story telling
• playing and games
• problem solving

The following sections will discuss some of these activities in relation to language learning in different contexts and within different research frameworks.

### 3.3.3 Participation as being

Building on his previous studies (2000; 2004a, 2004b, 2007), Schwienhorst (2009) discusses the contribution of virtual world environments to learner autonomy, reflection, and authentic communication and concludes that the immersiveness of the 3D environment has a positive impact on learner interaction in the target language. Two key affordances of the environment according to the author (op. cit.) are the use of avatars which allow for identity expression which can be linked to both in-world and out-of-world identity and the flexibility of the space which allows for experimentation with learning scenarios which are not possible in f2f educational contexts. In his 2004a study, he examines students’ use of indexical language (i.e. the use of “here”), for example, as an indication of a heightened sense of presence and co-presence compared to non-3D environments for online learning. He argues (2009) thus for further research into mapping of cognitive and meta-cognitive activity triggered by this sense of presence in the environment as a result of immersiveness.

Another study that highlights the role of immersiveness and cognitive development or higher order thinking skills (HOTs) in relation to language development is Leong’s (2011) study of Chinese as a Mother Tongue language in Singapore. In designing the tasks and to ensure deep learning, the researchers followed the Total Participation Technique Cognitive Engagement Model as discussed by Himmele and Himmele (2011) devised for learners in primary education. According to this model, deeper learning can be supported through the creation of classroom opportunities that encourage young
learners to think through the implications and the relevance of classroom activities to their own world. Their findings showed that with the use of role-play activities which build on the specific affordances of virtual worlds, students display greater higher order thinking skills than in the non-ICT control groups suggesting that the 3D environment has an impact on cognitive development. However, as the authors themselves remark, these findings are based on student and teacher feedback only and do not include all of the data collected over the entire research period and are limited to text-based interaction.

Finally, the notion of sense of presence as triggered by the immersiveness of the environment and the role-play potential it carries is also advocated by Lim (2009:8) in his discussion of “learning by being” in virtual worlds. According to Lim (ibid.), learning by being refers to the learning that one experiences as a result of explorations of self and identity in the virtual world environment as made possible by the immersive nature of the environment.

3.3.4 Participation as Negotiation for Action (NfA)

In their paper, Zheng et al. (2009) analyze the user chat logs and other artefacts of a virtual world, Quest Atlantis (QA), and propose the concept of Negotiation for Action (NfA) to explain how interaction, specifically, avatar-embodied collaboration between native English speakers and non-native speakers of English, provided resources for English language acquisition. This concept is developed from the notion of Negotiation for Meaning at the heart of the interaction process between Second Language learners (Krashen 1981; 1982; 1885; Long, 1980; Long and Porter, 1985; Pica et al. 1996; Warschauer, 1996 all cited in Zheng et al., 2009). Iterative multilayered analyses revealed several affordances of QA for language acquisition at both utterance and discourse levels. Through intercultural collaboration on solving content-based

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9 My Italics.
problems, participants successfully reached quest goals during which emergent identity formation and meaning making take place. The study also demonstrates that it is in this intercultural interaction that pragmatics, syntax, semantics, and discourse practices arose and were enacted.

3.3.5 Participation, interaction and learner strategies

In an exploratory study, Peterson (2010) builds on his previous work (2006) and provides a discussion of learner participation patterns and strategy use in the language learning of seven intermediate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in Japan in a virtual world platform. Discourse analysis of student chat logs revealed that the specific context appeared to elicit a high degree of participation and autonomy. Participation and autonomy were measured in terms of student turns, peer-to-peer exchanges, learner-centred interactions, limited use of the L1 (students native language) and a high degree of focus on task of the interactions. The transcripts showed the use of 5 main transactional strategies (i.e. split turns, time saving devices, addressivity, uppercase and quotation marks) and of 2 key interactional strategies (i.e. politeness and keyboard symbols). It was observed that adaptive strategies are also used by students such as transfers from both non-computer forms of interaction and other types of CMC such as email. Learners’ attitudes were also taken into consideration but no causal relationship was established between positive attitudes and participation strategies. Task design and telepresence which is understood as learners’ sense of presence in the virtual world as experienced through their avatars are listed as features which may have had an impact on the study outcomes and which require further investigation.

3.3.6 Non-verbal participation

In their study, Wigham and Chanier (2013) provide a classification of verbal and non-verbal communication acts within a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) course for Architecture students in Second Life. The study attempts to understand
multimodal communication structures through learner participation and learning practices in a collaborative learning setting. The classification developed by the authors builds on studies in the SLA research literature on non verbal and verbal communication in f2f contexts (i.e. McCafferty and Stam, 2008) and a discussion of nonverbal communication in Second Life where a distinction is made between user-generated and computer generated acts (Antonijevic, 2008). The authors then proceed to subdivide these categories further based on the communication act rather than with reference to how they are encoded by the user and the synthetic world. The modalities listed by the authors (op.cit.: pp. 66-68) are those of avatar proxemics (orientation), kinesics (gaze, posture and gestures) and appearance and are represented in Figure 3.4 below. The category of gestures is subdivided further to include extra-communicative acts (not defined by the authors in this paper), iconics (gestures which are a representation of an action or an object), deitics (the act of an avatar touching or manipulating an object), emblems (cultural gestures) and pantomimes (avatar animations of crying, smoking and typing, for example). Emblems are further divided into performative emblems, word emblems and meta-discursive emblems but are not expanded upon by the authors.10

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10 Full details of this classification are discussed in Wigham and Chanier (2011).
A comparison between learner verbal and nonverbal communication during the course led the authors to be able to conclude that nonverbal acts contribute to communication in learning in virtual worlds and that the preference for one mode over the other was determined by the role of the learner within a given learning task. The study indicates, furthermore, that learners were able to adapt to the communicative features of the environment and to use the nonverbal communicative features to overcome ambiguity in verbal communication. In particular, the authors highlight (op. cit. p. 82) the importance of proxemic closeness for L2 activities which involve collaboration and building. To conclude, Wigham (2012) discusses this supportive and dynamic relationship between verbal and non-verbal activity within the context of language learning in virtual worlds in general as interplay.\textsuperscript{11}
3.3.7 Participation as a catalyst for engagement among peers

In Deutschmann and Panichi (2009b), participation is discussed with reference to language awareness and learner engagement in online communication. In particular, the authors compared the first and the last sessions from an online oral proficiency course aimed at doctoral students conducted in the virtual world, Second Life. The study attempts to identify how supportive linguistic moves made by the teacher encourage learners to engage with language, and what type of linguistic behaviour in the learners leads to engagement in others. Overall differences in terms of floor space and turn-taking patterns were compared, and an in-depth discourse analysis of parts of the sessions was conducted with a focus on supportive linguistic moves such as back-channelling and elicitors. Their research indicates that the supportive linguistic behaviour of teachers is important in increasing learner engagement. In the study the authors were also able to observe a change in student linguistic behaviour between the first and the last sessions with students becoming more active in signalling involvement as the course progressed.

3.3.8 Participation as turn taking and floor space

In Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen (2009), two stages of an action research project involving two oral proficiency courses held in the virtual world, Second Life, were compared. Based on the experiences of this course, the researchers redesigned many aspects of it in order to improve student activity in terms of oral participation. The study was able to measure student participation based on floor space, turn lengths and turn-taking patterns and examine whether changes in design had contributed to more favourable outcomes in terms of learner participation. Results seem to indicate that meaning-focused task-design, which involves authenticity and collaborative elements, had a direct impact on learner participation and engagement. Furthermore, the results suggest that technical and social initiations into a complex environment such as SL are
important factors to be borne in mind when designing tasks for a course in a virtual world.

3.3.9 Participation through a sense of belonging

Molka-Danielsen, Panichi and Deutschmann (2010) reviewed reward models used in learning and teaching in virtual worlds and illustrated how reward models in language education are often irrelevant and have minimum impact in traditional f2f settings. The authors also refer to reward models borrowed from Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and Self-Determination Theory (e.g. Deci and Ryan, 1985) and suggest ways of applying these to language learning activities in virtual worlds to increase motivation to participate. They make the distinction between tangible and intangible rewards. Tangible rewards include, for example, objects such as T-shirts while intangible rewards would be the awarding of a specific status within the world which would carry specific privilege. They identify key elements that need to be included in a reward model for active language learning in Second Life such as immersion through the use of a narrative genre, encouraging a “flow-state” with the right balance between challenges and achievements and, last but not least, space for personal constructs that foster a sense of belonging and community. The main argument of this article is that the greater the “tangibility” of the rewards afforded to the learner through the specific features of the virtual world environment, the higher is the learners’ sense of belonging to and participation in the language learning community both within the virtual world and within the broader learning context.

3.3.10 Participation and community building

Closely related to learners’ sense of belonging is the concept of community building. Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2010) look at teacher and trainer strategies that are supportive of community building and relevant to learner participation in learning. Examples are taken from the Avalon Learning Project. Active learning theories such as
Activity Theory (Leont’ev, 1978; Engström, 1987; 1999; 2001) are used to explain the importance of building community for adoption and success of a learning system. In particular, this article focuses on the role of the expert teacher in encouraging the development of a sense of a community of learners and the skills required for such task. Key factors that were presented as important for the initial stages of community building are summarised in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2:** Factors impacting on community building and community maintenance in language learning in virtual worlds (Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor no.</th>
<th>Factors impacting on community building</th>
<th>Factors impacting on community maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>- Establishing a presence in non-virtual environments to bring in participants who would not normally be attracted to virtual worlds (the community is reached outside the virtual world).</td>
<td>- Ongoing socializing was made possible within the course syllabus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>- Building on existing needs and intrinsic motivation (i.e. making the experience relevant).</td>
<td>- A feeling that all participants were experiencing similar emotions in the environment (frustration, fun, fear, companionship).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>- Accepting resistance within the existing communities and turning that into a challenge.</td>
<td>- The establishment of a highly supportive environment initiated by the teacher and replicated by the other teachers with their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>- Timing: building on momentum when it arises.</td>
<td>- The provision of opportunities to reflect about the process participants were engaged in and to share experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5</th>
<th>- Leadership skills (by seminar presenter).</th>
<th>- Implementation of a loosely structured syllabus which enabled students to recap and catch up with the lessons they had missed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>- The learning community was established also outside the virtual world.</td>
<td>No information forthcoming from the article.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.11 Factors affecting participation in virtual worlds

Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall (2013) examined factors that affect participation within an online virtual world course in Sociolinguistics and collect information about learner linguistic participation through the learner contributions to voice-chat and text-based chat within the virtual world platform. They triangulate this data with Hrastinski’s (2007: 106) model of participation illustrated in Figure 3.2 above. The authors build on Hrastinski’s (2007) model and suggest that future research not only needs to take into consideration these factors in relation to participation but also needs to look at how factors influence other factors in a more dynamic and complex relationship to participation. In addition, the authors suggest that virtual worlds have a stronger amplifier effect on participation compared to other CMC tools and that, as a result, greater attention needs to be paid in the literature on the medium as a factor effecting participation. More specifically, they argue that the role of virtual world platforms such as Second Life can be neutral, positive or negative based on the degree of intensification of impact of the medium on the factors which have been deemed to influence participation. In particular, they point to teacher intervention as a way of addressing the role played by virtual world platforms on learner participation. In Figure 3.5 below, the authors illustrate the positive magnified impact with larger solid lines whereas dashed lines indicate negative impact of the medium.
Figure 3.5: Factors affecting participation in language learning in virtual worlds (Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2013: 20).

In addition to the above, Snyder, Panichi and Lindberg (2010) argue for the need to take into consideration quality of experience in understanding factors that impact on technology supported learning, including virtual worlds. With reference to learner motivation and participation in virtual worlds they list the following variables as being relevant: clear course design, the nature of the environment; the scope of student self-determination; strong peer collaboration and appropriate technical initiation (op. cit.: p. 46). They also explain that the degree to which a virtual environment is authentic and reflects the personal interest of its users is an important factor in quality of experience for end-users and its applicability to serve pedagogical innovation (op. cit: p. 49).
3.3.12 Designing for participation in virtual worlds.

This section will look at the CMCL literature on task design with a special focus on designing for participation in the context of language learning in virtual worlds from different theoretical stances (Deutschmann, Molka-Danielson and Panichi, 2011; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Jauregi et al., 2011; Molka-Danielsen et al., 2010; Peterson, 2012b). See also de Freitas et al., (2010), Dalgarno and Lee (2010), Lim (2009) and Salmon (2011) for a parallel discussion in the general educational literature. In particular, Salmon (2011) discusses learner interactivity as different stages of learner interaction with the environment and describes the different activities that can take place at each level.

![Figure 3.6: Model of teaching and learning in 3D virtual worlds (Salmon, 2011: 81).](image)
**Participation as simulation**

Jauregi *et al.* (2011) examine the development and use of interaction tasks for intercultural communication within the context of the EU funded Niflar project with the specific aim of exploiting the affordances of the environment. The activities that took place under the project made use of both text-based and voice-chat. The authors conclude that general task design principles as stated in the SLA literature (e.g. Ellis, 2003) need to be adapted for 3D virtual worlds so that rich oral interaction is triggered for task completion while making the most of the exploratory, functional and gaming possibilities of the virtual world platform of Second Life. In particular, the authors point to the need to exploit the specific realism or “life-likeness” of the environment to support more immersive simulations.

**Participatory skills in online gaming for language learning**

Building on previous research into language learner strategies in virtual worlds (Peterson 2006, 2010, 2012a), Peterson (2012b) reports on an exploratory case study of student linguistic and social interaction in text-based chat in the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) of Wonderland. This study is different to the previous study by Jauregi *et al.* (2011) as it does not discuss task design explicitly. However, as the author points out (*op.cit.*), the design of the game itself structures the type of activities that are available to students. It should be noted that the aim of all activities within the game are to enhance player participation in the game itself (playing) and that language learning in this specific study is incidental to the game. This case study differs also from previous studies carried out by Peterson as it looks at student interaction with players within the game who are not part of their formal learning context thus making the development of rapport with these players an essential part of the experience. Specific linguistic and social strategies that proved important in the learners’ efforts to build rapport with other players were the use of positive
politeness in the form of greetings, leave-takings, informal language, small talk and humour. Significant moves by students in building rapport and for their participation in the game were also the establishment and maintenance of intersubjectivity through the creation of friendships, teams and ongoing use of continuers or utterances designed to signal attention and interest in what interlocutors are saying. In addition, requests for assistance and requests for information were also used by students throughout the experience and considered important in terms of rapport building and maintenance of relationships with other players. The second part of this study looks explicitly at learner attitudes towards participation in MMORPG gaming. Results from the post-study oral interviews indicate that, in line with previous findings discussed elsewhere (Peterson, 2011), the game provided a steep learning curve for students in terms of their becoming familiar with the objectives of the game and with the required actions. Students also commented on the limitations of the in-game help features. Students however commented more favourably on other aspects of participation in the game. In particular students claimed that the nature of the computer-based interaction combined with the use of pseudonyms and avatars helped reduce anxiety and contributed towards risk taking in the use of the target language. Students also appreciated the opportunity to come into contact with native or expert speakers of the target language.

**Transient spaces for different modes of participation**

In the previous two studies (Jauregi et al., 2011 and Peterson, 2012b) task design is discussed from the point of view of design principles in the general language learning literature in the first case and from the point of view of gaming in the second. In a different project, “Virtual Campus for Life Long Learning” (NUV, 2007), Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi (2009) discuss the virtual representations, tools, context and spaces used in course activities. This project provided for the design and building of spaces for language learning within a virtual world platform. They observed
that, while the virtual world of Second Life can replicate the dynamics of the classroom lecture, it gives further opportunities for interactive and active teaching as learning activities can take place in dispersed and diversified virtual spaces. These can be defined as transient spaces insofar as participants, activities and representations change over time (op. cit.: 22). Designing transient learning spaces raises different challenges and opportunities from designing learning in the traditional physical classroom. Challenges include, inter-alia, enabling new users to orient themselves in these spaces and how to behave in the new environments, for example. Transient learning spaces also offer new opportunities, such as the ability to design and develop a specific space for each course. In addition to this, the nature of the 3D environment is such that it allows for change and adaptation to occur and for the stakeholders in the process (teachers, learners and institutions) to negotiate the modes of participation that are relevant to them (i.e. formal, informal settings and processes, the tailoring of the environment, etc.).

*Managing participation through instructional design*

Deutschmann and Panichi (2009a) discuss the various phases involved in designing a course for language learning in virtual worlds from scratch in an attempt to maximise learner participation specifically during the course. The key areas of this process they have identified include:

1. Familiarisation with the environment
2. Preparation of appropriate content
3. Meaningful task design (i.e. tasks that make use of the specific affordances of the environment)
4. Giving explicit instructions
5. Technical support
6. Socialisation opportunities
7. Taking learners’ prior attitudes and expectations into account
8. Teacher roles and behaviour
9. Feedback opportunities
10. Fostering learner autonomy

As far as managing participation, the authors make several recommendations based on research findings published elsewhere (Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009b). These findings suggest that learners can “learn” to participate in the virtual world if provided with specific input and support from teachers and that this skill can be developed over time as learners become not only more proficient in the target language but in the negotiation of communication skills in the specific environment as well. One final aspect that needs monitoring and to be made explicit with learners in the interest of participation is the use of the various communication channels for multimodal communication within the specific setting.

As far as task design is concerned in relation to the specific affordances of virtual world platforms, such as Second Life, the authors discuss (op. cit.: 36) three dimensions in particular. The first dimension they refer to is the social/communicative/cognitive dimension. Tasks that make use of this dimension of the virtual world encourage learners to share and build on their knowledge through social interaction. The second dimension the authors refer to is the affective/creative dimension. Tasks that make use of this dimension of the virtual world promote the exploration of identity, cultural norms and values and encourage artistic expression and representation such as performance. The third dimension of virtual worlds that can be exploited by specific task design is the spatial/physical dimension. Tasks in this dimension encourage learners to use the virtual world platform as a source of information and for the exploration of existing artefacts, as a space for navigation and movement and as a place for cross-linguistic and intercultural contact through interaction with other users.
A final consideration is made by Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen (2010) in relation to designing for the affective dimension of learners in virtual worlds. In particular they discuss how the visual nature of the environment may impact on learners. For example, they suggest learners may react differently to the environment based on their own individual beliefs about teaching and learning. Some students may find the game-like feel of the platform does not coincide with their understandings of what education “should” be. They suggest that the creation of environments which some how replicate learners’ previous experiences of learning (i.e. a space with desks or a whiteboard) may facilitate transition to and acceptance of learning in the virtual world platform. Similarly, it may be that the replication of non-virtual reality rituals such as sitting in a circle, standing up to talk to the class, facing an avatar who is talking to you and walking out of the door when you leave the room may contribute to individual perceptions of participation and control (op. cit.: 183). Last but not least, the authors also suggest teachers and designers bear in mind teacher avatar appearance and the impact that it might have on learners from different backgrounds.

**Combining different participation needs**

Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2011) use Activity Theory (Leont’ev, 1978; Engström, 1987; 1999; 2001) to look at how task design incorporated a variety of aspects which ultimately led to greater learner motivation and participation. Using an Activity Theoretical model, the case study describes the design and initial implementation of a telecollaborative learning activity between four universities in Second Life. The four student groups were all attending quite different programs within their own institutions. The main challenges encountered were that of accommodating the different needs taking the diverse motivational objectives of each group into account, and making use of the affordances of the tool (Second Life) in this pursuit.
Examples of different learner needs in this context were:

- language proficiency levels
- institutional requirements
- timetabling and attendance options
- syllabus requirements
- learning objectives

3.4 Conclusions

Based on the review of the core online learning literature on participation and the specific core literature on participation in CMCL and language learning in virtual worlds, I would like to suggest a three tier-based description of the different levels participation can be discussed at. The first tier is represented by interaction in the SLA research tradition as described in Chapter 2 of this thesis. When this tradition is used to analyse learner interaction in virtual worlds, the focus is primarily, if not exclusively, on participation as linguistic interaction among users. This interaction or learner discourse is either logged in chat logs or other text-based communication channels in the environment such as Note Cards or Instant Messages or/and transcribed from voice-chat recordings. The main focus of this level of research is to look at the relationship between interaction and SLA. The main analytical tool is Discourse Analysis.

At a second level, that of language learning pedagogy or language learning and teaching as it is usually referred to in the Anglo-American foreign language education tradition, participation and interaction in virtual world language education are discussed also in relation to affect, learner attitudes, motivation, learner autonomy, meta-cognition, reflection, language awareness. These aspects are also discussed in the general language teaching and learning literature and are by no means specific to language education in virtual worlds as has been discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to Breen (2001) in particular.
Finally, at a third level, participation is discussed as a concern for task design. Within
this discussion, it has emerged that it is important to make the most of the affordances
of the specific environment while taking into consideration the general issues in relation
to task design within the communicative approach to language teaching. In particular,
the literature would seem to suggest the central role played by the immersive nature of
the environment as a way of creating a cognitive and emotional context for learning.
If one goes back to look at the initial discussions of participation in online learning as
discussed by Bento and Shuster (2003) and Hrastinski (2007, 2008, 2009), it would
appear that, while recognising the importance of the initial framing of participation in
online learning both in terms of activity within a 2D online learning platform, and low
and high levels of interaction with content for example, language learning in virtual
worlds demands a less “flat” and more “embodied” or multidimensional and
multimodal framework for research as also discussed in the section on CMCL. Indeed,
the broader scope of learner activity in relation to the affordances of virtual worlds for
learning is also documented in the general educational literature (Dalgarno and Lee
2010; de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010; Peachey et. al. 2010; Salmon, 2009). Thus, to
conclude, it would appear to make sense to argue that the traditional framing of
participation in SLA and CALL purely as linguistic discourse runs the risk of presenting
only a very small facet of a much more complex issue.
Chapter 4 Methodology

“…at any point in our lives we all have some level of understanding of the life we are currently living, and some degree of puzzlement. The puzzlement arises, not from our having no understanding at all of something that is happening, but from feeling that our current understandings are not entirely satisfactory.” (Allwright, 2003: 123)

“…the case study is not a specific technique but rather a method of collecting and organizing data so as to maximise our understanding of the unitary character of the social being or the object studied.” (Dörnyei, 2007: 152)

4.0 Introduction

Following an initial introductory excursus into my philosophical assumptions and their role within my research project, this chapter on methodology will discuss the rationale for my research design and how it was supported and developed by my research protocol. I will then illustrate how, through the use of reflexivity and ongoing reflective engagement with my research project and its processes in the qualitative research tradition (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2009; 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Holliday, 2002; Lazaraton, 1995; 2003; Mason, 2002; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2003; K. Richards, 2009; L. Richards, 2009; Strauss and Corin, 1990; Woods, 2006) I was able to gain a more in-depth understanding of what I was doing. In turn and over time, this increased awareness of what I was doing enabled me to go on and frame my research project within the field of Practitioner Research, and to make use, more specifically, of Exploratory Practice (EP) as defined by Allwright (2000; 2001; 2003; 2005; 2006; 2009) and Allwright and Hanks (2009). Last but not
least, as I moved away from my initial conceptualisations of what I thought I was doing and gained a better idea of how my project was indeed unfolding, I also came to the decision to present my research project as a case study (e.g. Baxter and Jack, 2008; Casanave, 2010; Creswell, 2009; 2013; Chapelle and Duff, 2003; Cousin, 2009; Gillham, 2000; Dörnyei, 2007; Duff, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; 2011; Hayes, 2006; Hood, 2009; Johansson, 2003; McKay, 2006; Merriam, 1988; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2011; Robson, 1993; Stake, 1995; 2005; Tellis, 1997a; 1997b; van Lier, 2005; Yin, 2003; 2009) albeit with a very heavy ‘reflective’ coating. To conclude, this chapter is thus to be understood as both an overview of the procedures I followed in my research project, including a discussion of the underlying rationale for those procedures, and as a narrative of emergent understandings which resulted from that process and which ultimately came to bear upon the research project in terms of significant procedural outcomes in their own right. These outcomes were:

1) The decision to relate my project to the Exploratory Practice approach and

2) The decision to frame my work as a Case Study.

Indeed, these are not to be considered as a priori research decisions but as outcomes from the reflective process. This approach to Case Study research whereby the case often only becomes apparent after the researcher has started working with her research project is also confirmed in the Case Study research literature (e.g. Hood, 2009). The figure below (Figure 4.1) presents the case study at the heart of my research project with two layers of reflective coating: that of Exploratory Practice and of researcher reflexivity. Both dimensions of reflectivity and their implications in terms of methodology will be discussed in full throughout this chapter.
4.1 Philosophical assumptions

All research carries with it some bias of some sort (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2002) and is inevitably influenced by the researcher’s experience of the world including one’s beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) and how that reality can be understood and explained (epistemology). In my case, my ontological starting point was to be found in my belief that teaching and learning are part of the same process and need to be discussed together as a unit or a whole. Furthermore, and in line with the discussion in Breen (2001) and Lantolf (2002) in Chapter 2, and Hrastinski (2007) and Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall (2013) in Chapter 3, I was convinced that the nature of participation could be best understood only if I was able, as a researcher, to capture the complexity of the context in which it played out. In short, it seemed to me that it did not make sense to attempt to research participation as an isolated and independent act of the learner devoid of context and interactions with others. I felt, therefore, that it was essential within my research project that I provided a detailed account of the teaching and learning conditions of my context and my own role within the educational dynamics of that context. This approach led me
to identify the dynamics of classroom interactions as a core element of my research. The aim of my approach was to enable other teachers and researchers to obtain, on the one hand, a “feel” for my context and, on the other, to provide them with enough information so that they could compare and contrast my context and my claims about participation with their own pedagogical dynamics and understandings. My methodology as described in this chapter thus amounts to an account of those procedures that I identified as useful in my attempt to research the nature of participation within the framework of my ontology.

4.2 Research design

As stated in Chapter 1, Section 1.2 on the Research Rationale, my PhD aims to address the need for additional research on the topic of learner participation in virtual worlds as identified within the CMCL literature. From the very beginning of my research project, my main aim was to create a research design which would allow me to think about participation in relation to formal language instruction in three dimensional virtual world platforms in a more ‘fluid’ and ‘flexible’ and less ‘structured’ way than had been done in previous research. Indeed, while my own experience with Action Research (Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielson, 2009; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009b) had enabled me to discuss bringing about changes in student participation in virtual world language learning, I was nevertheless left with the nagging feeling as a practitioner researcher that perhaps our focus on bringing about and documenting change had overlooked a more fundamental educational issue, namely, what is meant by participation in the virtual world in the first place, how do we as teachers and course designers impact on it and, more generally, why we are doing what we are doing at all.

In other words, it seemed to me that my previous research had taken for granted the concept of participation. I was convinced that further research could only really make sense if it allowed me to go back and find a way of getting at some of the assumptions
that were being made in the research literature in general. In other words, I felt I couldn’t move forward until I had taken a couple of steps backwards.

In view of the discussion above, I was aiming for a research design that would enable me to incorporate my professional and epistemological bias and that would be as open as possible so that I would have ample room for both thinking about participation as well as documenting how it played out in the virtual world. I felt I needed to create a research design which would enable me to explore the methods available to me just as much as the topic. In this sense, the research project became equally as much about thinking about ways of understanding participation in the specific context as understanding the phenomenon itself. Thus, I envisaged a methodology that would attempt to capture, on the one hand, as broad a picture as possible of what we were doing as a community of language practitioners in virtual worlds in relation to my research topic but which, at the same time, would provide me with a framework for “letting go” of previous methods and allowing new methods to emerge. This non-prescriptive and flexible approach to research methodology is often referred to as “emergent design” in the qualitative research literature (e.g. Creswell, 2009; 2013; Dörnyei, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As a result, the aim of my research design was to cater for the delivery of two kinds of research outcomes:

1) Outcomes about participation and;

2) Outcomes about a methodology for thinking about participation in my specific context.

4.2.1 Literature review of relevant research approaches and foci

At the same time, I was also aware of the existing approaches to research being employed in the field and of the various research foci and how they were being combined in the research literature. However, from my perspective at the time, I felt that none of these studies, although contributing significantly to the general discussion
around learner participation and interaction in virtual worlds, were able to provide me with the type of methodological approach and framing of the topic that was suited to my aims for a number of reasons. Indeed, while some of these studies made use of exploratory research approaches (Peterson 2010b) others were less so (Sykes, 2005; 2009) or took a specific and focussed look at a clearly identified area or topic in relation to learner interaction. For example, Schweinhorst (2004; 2009) and Shield, Davies and Weininger (2000) examined the role of virtual worlds in relation to learner autonomy; Shield (2003) discussed the emergence of oral discourse in written format; Zheng et al. (2009) discussed learner Negotiation for Action within virtual world language learning tasks; Sykes (2005; 2009) discussed the relationship between the platform and learner pragmatics; Kuriscak and Luke (2009) explored learner attitudes to virtual worlds for language learning. In addition, all of these studies, with the exception of Sykes (2005; 2009), discussed learner interaction in text-based communication only, limiting the analysis of interaction to one mode of communication and Kuriscak and Luke (2009) did not include data from the virtual world platform at all in their analysis. Peterson’s work on learner participation strategies (2006; 2010b) was of particular interest to me and has been reviewed in Chapter 3 accordingly, but again, it was limited to data from text-based chat logs. Indeed, even though VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocols) had been available for use with virtual world platforms at least since around 2003 and integrated into some virtual world platforms themselves such Second Life in 2007 (Wadley, 2007), the bulk of research into virtual worlds available at the time within CMCL continued to focus mainly on the use of text-based chat in learner interactions. The reasons why many researchers continued to focus on text-based learner interactions despite the availability of voice-chat can only be speculated upon here. One possibility is that voice protocols add a layer of complexity to the running of educational events within virtual worlds. It may be the case that in many educational contexts, text-based
interaction is easier to manage in view of the type and amount of technical support required. It can thus be argued that the researcher’s focus is often limited by what is more practical to capture. As far as my own research project was concerned, however, my previous research on participation with reference to both communication channels of text and oral chat made a dual modality perspective the logical starting point. This decision was also in line with the call for more multimodal research specifically (Lamy, 2004; Lamy and Hampel, 2007) as discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4.

Since commencement of my project in 2010, there have been a few new studies that look at language learner interaction in virtual worlds. Some of these studies indeed look at the combination of student interaction in the environment both in terms of written and oral communication (Canto, Jauregi and van den Bergh, 2013; Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2011; Jauregi et al. 2011; Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2013), while some have continued to focus on text-chat only (Peterson 2011; 2012a; 2012b). However, none of these studies expand on the existing research approaches in any way. They either focus on a discussion of learner participation and interaction within the communicative channels with which we are already acquainted such as voice and text based chat (Canto, Jauregi and van den Bergh 2013; Peterson 2011; 2012a; 2012b; Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2013) or use an experimental and control approach to examining the phenomenon of learner interaction (Canto, Jauregi and van den Bergh, 2013) which arguably does not allow for an exploration of the issues. Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2011) used an Activity Theory approach which, while broader in its general research approach, was focussed more on describing the technicalities of telecollaboration than exploring the notion of learner participation in any way. The most relevant recent research is the study by Wigham and Chanier
(2013)\(^1\) which only appeared in an international research journal towards the very end of my research project. In this study, the authors take a more comprehensive look at communication in the virtual world in line with my own attempt to broaden our view of what was going on and provide, for the first time in the virtual world literature within CMCL, a discussion of multimodality in virtual worlds understood as a combination of both learner verbal (text-based and voice-based communication) and non-verbal communication such as through avatar appearance, proxemics (orientation in the three-dimensional space) and kinesics (gaze, posture, gestures). However, the main focus of this study is on the interplay between these two modes of communication rather than on exploring the notion of participation *per se*. The extent to which this study became relevant to my own research project will be discussed in Chapter 6.

4.2.2 The Research Protocol

The Protocol which is discussed and presented here is to be considered a summary of my data generation and collection plan and the issues involved in this process during the entire duration of my research. My research design and research questions, and their development over time, are clearly stated and traceable in the documents that inform my research protocol: my initial research proposal in February 2010, in the progress reports at the end of my first year (April 2011), in a memorandum to my supervisors in October 2011 and in my researcher log. The Protocol was intimately related and logically connected to the research design (i.e. my aims, my rationale and my bias or starting point) and constituted the identification, sequencing and interdependency of actions that needed to be taken for the implementation of the research project in relation to the information and resources that became available to me as I progressed with my research project. This dynamic process as captured by this set of documents is one with which I constantly engaged as I proceeded with my research project both as a means of making

\(^1\) Findings from this study had been initially published in Wigham, and Chanier (2011).
sure that I was on track and as a framework for justifying all deviations from the initial research design as they became necessary. Yin (2009) highlights the importance of adopting a research protocol in Case Study research. He argues that research protocols contribute to validity of Case Study research by providing the researcher with a logical sequence of events and procedures to be followed with constant reference to the research questions and propositions (Yin, 2009: 79-82). In addition, protocols can also be seen as contributing to the general qualitative research requirement of transparency (Mason, 2002: 192) by allowing for closer scrutiny of the researcher's actions and thinking at the time he or she was carrying out the research.

In line with recommendations in the Case Study research literature (Yin, 1994: 64 cited in Tellis 1997a: 5; McKay, 2006: 72-74; Nunan, 1992; Yin, 2009: 79-82) my Protocol addressed the following data collection and procedural issues:

1. Identification of an appropriate data collection setting;
2. Identification of the data to be collected;
3. Identification of the methods to be used for data generation and collection;
4. The timeframe for data collection;
5. Ethical requirements for the research project;
6. Risk management;
7. Methods for data analysis;
8. Data classification;
9. Procedures for reporting of the project.

**Identification of an appropriate data collection setting (Protocol item no. 1)**

I was aware that I needed to identify a setting which could maximise the possibility of uncovering relevant information in relation to my research questions. In addition, it needed to be a context or setting where data collection would be manageable, access would be possible and for which I would have the resources. I envisioned an online
language-learning course in virtual worlds similar to those I had carried out previously. I planned to monitor what courses were being run by other colleagues and to be ready to run my own course if an appropriate course did not come my way. I had identified Second Life as the preferred platform for the course as I was already familiar with its settings from my previous teaching and research. One of the main features of the course would be that the virtual world platform was the primary platform for interaction during the course. Under the Avalon project (Avalon, 2008a), we had carried out a number of courses in virtual worlds and had observed how courses were being run in different contexts. There was a general understanding in the development workpackage at the time under the project that it was only when attempts were made to use the virtual world platform as the main or sole platform for course communication that it was possible to see the real potential or limitations of the medium. Therefore, the setting I identified for data collection was that of an online language course that would make use of the virtual world as the primary medium for course delivery. In the end, the course I ended up having access to for my research project was the Talkademy Business English Course which saw me involved in a way that I had not initially contemplated. The course is discussed in full in Chapter 5.

Identification of the data to be collected (Protocol item no. 2)

From the beginning my aim was to collect all data generated as a direct result of the running of the course. I predicted that this would include automated chat logs, voice-chat recordings, snapshots\(^2\) and/or recordings of the lessons and all avatar group interactions in the 3D environment in connection with the course. However, in the end, as a result of my direct involvement in the design of the course and of the framing of my research project as a Case Study as will be discussed in Section 4.4, the data I

\(^2\) Second Life provides users with a snapshot function which enables users to take snapshots of the environment they are in.
identified as being relevant to my research project also included a significant amount of additional contextual information that I had not anticipated at the outset.

**Identification of the methods to be used for data generation and collection (Protocol item no. 3)**

I planned that data would be generated by the running of the course. Some of the data such as the text-chat would be captured automatically by the virtual world platform and saved onto my computer. Voice-chat and avatar movement and activity in the platform would be captured by a desktop recording system external to the virtual world platform and saved on my computer. Furthermore, as my original idea was to observe a course run by a fellow virtual-world teacher, I initially considered observation as a participant-observer and the compilation of field notes from the research tradition of ethnography as an additional method for data collection and generation (e.g. Atkinson *et al.*, 2001; Dörnyei, 2007; Mason, 2002; Nunan, 1992; Watson-Gegeo 1988). I also considered observation of the recordings as an additional phase of this process.

**The timeframe for data collection (Protocol item no. 4)**

I initially predicted that data collection would coincide with the running of the course. However, it was only later, after I had framed my research as a case study and it became necessary to include additional contextual data that I realised that the timeframe needed to be more flexible. Additional data was, thus, collected retroactively and the main data collection phase ended up coinciding with the simultaneous development and course implementation processes. The main change I made was the decision to record the course development meetings as well as the lessons and collect relevant documentary data that the development process produced.

**Ethical requirements for the research project (Protocol item no. 5)**

I identified three main processes where research ethics would come into play. The first would be in connection to the risks and potential benefits involved for the participants
and the procedures for obtaining informed consent (e.g. Dornyei, 2007; Duff, 2008; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Mason, 2002). The second would be to ensure compliance with my institution’s ethical requirements. There was also a third level of ethical concern that would derive from the specific platform I planned on using. The concerns were related to both the specific platform and to the general area of ethics in Internet based research. Panichi and Deutschmann (2012), for example, discuss ethical concerns which are relevant to researchers working with virtual worlds in the field of telecollaboration in language learning. The authors point to the need to take into consideration issues such as the users’ perceptions of privacy, observation in virtual worlds, perceptions of impunity, avatar identity and, last but not least, intellectual and copyright issues related to both the in-world builds\(^3\) and user avatars. All of these issues had to be thought through in relation to the specific course I would end up being granted access to.

**Risk management (Protocol item no. 6)**

There were a number of risks associated with my project. The first was that of not being able to identify a course which would be appropriate for my research focus. Courses in virtual worlds were still a niche activity in CMCL and opportunities for being allowed to research the work of other colleagues were few. I realised that I would have to be quick in accepting an offer to join a course and might have to make do with a course which was not as focussed as I had hoped. I was aware that there was a possibility I would have to reconsider my research questions as a result of the course I ended up gaining access to.

In addition, I was well aware that data collection and research of learning into virtual world platforms was still in the experimental phase based on my first hand experience and direct contact and collaboration with fellow researchers working in the field, for

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\(^3\) An ‘in-world build’ is a 3D object that has been built in the virtual world by users.
example, under the EU-funded projects Avalon (Avalon, 2008a) and Niflar (Niflar, 2014). Many colleagues at the time were still exploring and trying to identify the best recording applications. There were a number of issues around recording that were still considered troublesome. One of such issues was the source of sound going in and coming out of the platform. My previous experiments with recording of virtual world teaching and learning clearly indicated that a number of factors could go wrong during the process and that is was easy to lose or not capture some of the data. A common problem was that of capturing avatar activity while not capturing voice-chat. My situation was particularly at risk as, in most cases, researchers worked in teams and there would be often recordings running from two different computers at the same time as back up. As a sole researcher, this back-up procedure was not feasible for a number of technical reasons. I realised that I would have to find ways of working with such a volatile situation and that missing data might have to be captured in other ways such as via interviews during or at the end of the course. Last but not least, I was aware of the crucial need to provide for a combination of both online and offline back-up for the data and to find satisfactory ways of managing and storing the heavy data files the recordings of Second Life would create.

Methods for data analysis (Protocol item no. 7)

As a qualitative researcher, I saw myself as the primary tool for analysis (e.g. Alvesson and Söldberg, 2009; Croker, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). In view of this approach, I was aware of the fact that it was important that I made my ontological and epistemological bias explicit from the beginning of my project (e.g. Alvesson and Söldberg, 2009; Mason, 2002). I identified the two processes of observation and direct interpretation as my key analytical strategies as endorsed by the qualitative research literature (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Dönyei, 2007; Creswell, 2009; 2013; Nunan, 1992;
Richards, 2003; Stake, 1995). I was aware that analysis within this tradition was a step-by-step process that started with the raw data and moved up in a systematic way to interpretation as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

![Diagram](Figure 4.2: Data Analysis in Qualitative Research (Creswell, 2009: 185)).

In the end, and more specifically in relation to the virtual world data I had collected, I decided to include the technique of visualisation (Mason, 2002: 111-112) or an analysis of visual data based on direct observation and interpretation. This research decision only emerged later on in my research process and was a result of the data classification and first level analysis I engaged in and which is discussed in full detail in Chapter 6.
Data classification (Protocol item no. 8)

Data classification was the least defined area of my research protocol as the open and exploratory nature of my overall research approach made it difficult to predict what the final data-set would look like. For example, would I be using all of the data I had collected? Would I be focussing on verbal data only or would it be relevant to include non-verbal data in my analysis? Would I be analysing the data from the recordings only or would there be additional contextual data that needed to be taken into consideration? This lack of certainty around the data-set also meant that it was impossible to determine in advance what the most effective way of organising it would be. For instance, I did not know whether it would make sense to attempt data classification processes such as that advocated by Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and its more recent developments (e.g. Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) or whether I would be needing a less systematic and more loosely interpretative approach such as that suggested by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) and described in detail by others (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Mason, 2002; L. Richards, 2009; Stake, 1995). In the end, I opted for the latter approach as a result, primarily, of the multimodal nature of my data set. Indeed, my increased focus on and inclusion of non-linguistic and contextual data meant that linguistic coding as suggested by Grounded Theory (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was not applicable as a strategy across the entire data set. Finally, as I started out with my first attempts at data classification it soon became clear to me that data classification and data analysis were part of the same process (e.g. Creswell, 2009; 2013 Richards, 2009) and that it did not make sense to attempt to deal with these two processes separately within my specific research project.
Procedures for reporting of the project (Protocol item no. 9)

I intended to report on the project by making use of in-depth and detailed descriptions of my research process. In this sense, my reporting of the project would also contribute to and be part of the analysis (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Cousin, 2009; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Holliday, 2002; Mason, 2002; Richards, 2003; L. Richards, 2009; Richardson, 2000; Stake, 1995). I was aware that writing would start during the research project and would not be limited to an “after-the-fact” account. However, what I had not clearly anticipated was the extent to which this would play out. The detailed description of the Case Study and my reflexive approach ended up providing the research project with additional descriptive data and analytical input I had not foreseen. The number of drafts of Chapter 7 (the analysis chapter), for example, are a testament to the role played by writing as a method of inquiry as described specifically by Richardson (2000) and acknowledged more generally in the qualitative and Case Study research literature as a key part of the research process (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Holliday, 2002; Mason, 2002; L. Richards, 2009; Yin, 2009).

4.2.3 Limitations of the Protocol

Finally, as I progressed with the activities listed in my research protocol, and, in particular, as I proceeded to organise and classify the data that I had collected, I realised that the protocol had failed to capture a fundamental aspect of my research methodology: reflexivity. Indeed, what the research protocol had not foreseen was my constant and ongoing engagement with the literature, with my community of practice (in the sense of Lave and Wenger, 1991), and my reflective practice as a researcher for the entire duration of my research project and not only during the limited time frame of the data collection phase. Furthermore, it was not until I embarked on the initial data classification process that I realised that there were two fundamental, yet distinct, reflection processes which were central to my research project. One was my reflection...
as a practitioner during the course design and implementation and the other was my reflective process as a researcher. This oversight may be explained by the fact that I ended up being involved in the course in ways that I had not anticipated at the outset of my research project (e.g. as a teacher, developer and a researcher).

4.3. Reflexivity

In the qualitative research tradition, reflexivity is generally understood as the researcher’s ability to explicitly recognise his or her role in the research process and to relate it to the research outcomes (e.g. Mason, 2002). According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009: 9), reflexivity is understood as the sum of reflective activities carried out at different levels by a researcher engaged in an empirical research project and has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection. They explain (op. cit.) how the researcher needs to pay equal attention to knowledge development processes as to the delivery of knowledge outcomes. This will involve the researcher reflecting not only about his or her own role in the research project but also about the assumptions that are embedded in the specific research context under investigation. The authors advocate (op.cit. p. 9) that the main aim of reflexivity in empirical research is to provide excerpts of reality that open up opportunities for understanding rather than establishing “truths” as advocated by the positivist tradition. Finally, they conclude that for reflexivity to be justified, however, it must also lead to tangible outcomes in the research project (op. cit. p. 314). In other words, it must be productive.

As discussed above, the main method that my initial research protocol did not list explicitly and which has since become an integral part of my research process is that of reflexivity. From the very initial phases of my research process and throughout the entire process, I found myself constantly asking the following two questions: What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Ultimately, the answers to these questions would yield outcomes that were relevant to my research project as a whole by helping me to
define my sphere of action. In particular, my ongoing reflexive practices as a researcher contributed to the positioning of my research within the traditions of EP and Classroom Research and, last but not least, to the framing of my research project as a Case Study.

4.3.1 Practitioner Research and my online practice

The first outcome of my reflexivity was my awareness that I was involved with the research project at two levels: as a practitioner and as a researcher. As I started to see myself more and more clearly as a practitioner as well as a researcher within my research project, I was also able to start thinking about what I was doing increasingly in terms of Practitioner Research within the field of Applied Linguistics and Classroom Research (e.g. Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Allwright, 2005; Bailey and Nunan, 1996; Brown and Rodgers, 2002; Ellis; 1997; 2011; Lockhart and Richards, 1996; McKay, 2006; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2003; Toshida et al., 2009). Practitioner Research is generally understood in education as research carried out by practitioners in relation to their practice as teachers (e.g. Allwright, 2005; Ellis, 2012; ProDAIT, 2006c). Indeed, once I had established that the field of Practitioner Research was relevant to what I was doing, it also became clear to me that my research project had much to gain from recognising the role played by my “practice” albeit as it played out online and in a virtual world platform. Furthermore, this was in line with what other virtual world researchers were suggesting, i.e. that virtual world activities are to be seen as an extension of non-virtual world human activity and not as a different kind of activity (e.g. Macintyre, 2008; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Peachey et al., 2010b). As such, I would argue that it is legitimate to claim that one’s practice in education is by no means limited to classroom contact and f2f interaction with learners and that it can play out just as easily across different media including online platforms and Learning Management Systems (LMS) in general. Indeed, in their discussion of Practitioner Research in relation to online communication in language learning and
teaching, Lamy and Hampel (2007: 157) suggest that much is to be gained within CMCL research by drawing on the wealth of valuable methodological knowledge about Practitioner Research born of the experience of the offline community of language professionals. In conclusion, I felt justified in situating my research equally within the tradition of Practitioner Research in Applied Linguistics as within the research tradition of CMCL in CALL (e.g. Dooly and O’Dowd, 2010; Lamy and Hampel, 2007) and virtual world research (e.g. Cheney and Sanders, 2011; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Peachey et al., 2010b). I felt that this was indeed a beneficial step for my research project. Indeed, while I was not changing my research focus on participation in virtual world language education, I found that contextualising my research within the broader tradition of Practitioner Research allowed me to discuss and analyse what I would be observing also within the context of teaching and learning dynamics. In addition, I also was convinced that this new perspective enabled me to address a concern that had been nagging at me for a long time and which was at the basis of my rationale for exploratory research framework, i.e. the tendency of the bulk of CMCL research into virtual worlds to focus excessively on the medium (cf. Hubbard, 2009b). It was if, in a way, the focus on the new, i.e. the virtual world, had some how obscured the fact that what was really going on had just as much to do with the dynamics of teaching and learning and our professional practice as it had with virtual worlds and we, as a teaching and research professionals in virtual worlds, needed to do justice to this in future research. This is not to say that the synthetic medium through which teaching and learning played out was not an important part of the context, but I felt is was important to make sure that my research was not dominated by a discussion of the platform to the detriment of considerations about educational practice.
4.3.2 Exploratory Practice (EP)

In Section 4.2 on Research Design above I explained how my previous experience with Action Research had led me to want to try a new approach to researching what I was doing which, subsequently, led me to make use of a more reflexive approach in general. However, it was not until I had completed the initial and main data collection phase as described in the Research Protocol that I was able to fully appreciate the extent to which my research project was in line in particular with the Exploratory Practice (EP) approach to Practitioner Research. It was at that point, and before embarking upon data analysis, that I made the explicit research decision to go back and re-examine what I had done up until then in light of the understandings about Classroom Research suggested by EP.

EP was developed in the early 90’s as a way of readdressing what some researchers considered to be some of the fundamental limitations of Practitioner Research (Allwright 2001; 2003; 2005; Allwright and Hanks, 2009). These shortcomings are summarised by Allwright (2003) as the tendency of Practitioner Research, and Action Research in particular, to bring about change for change’s sake without stopping to explore classroom life in broader terms and without seeking a deep rationale for the change that was being proposed. He argued (2003) that, in the name of instructional efficiency or improved teaching techniques, research was being carried out often by the lone researcher with little contact with classroom practitioners. This approach to research, according to Allwright, was limited in its impact as it did not take into account the broader and far more complex human reality of the language classroom. In response to this excessive “technicism” of research, EP was thus suggested by Allwright (2001; 2003; 2005) as a way of putting Practitioner Research back on track by placing the focus of classroom research on understanding first rather than change, people rather than methods, quality of classroom life rather than quality of outputs and by viewing
research as a collective effort explicitly involving teachers, learners and researchers rather than the as an activity of the isolated and detached academic researcher.\(^4\)

According to this approach to Practitioner Research (Allwright 2001, 2003; 2005; 2006; 2009; Allwright and Hanks 2009; Ellis, 2012; ProDAIT 2006b), practitioners engage in research about a classroom life puzzle they have identified as meaningful within the context of their everyday teaching practices. They use research tools available within the educational context and work so that the research is non-invasive or “non-parasitic” by not placing additional demands on those involved (Allwright, 2005: 354). The aim of the approach is to increase the “quality of life” in the language classroom through collective understanding of what is going on by all involved as they engage in everyday classroom practices. All participants (i.e. teachers, support staff and students) are explicitly involved in the process, the research outcomes of which are understandings that are relevant to all members of the classroom community at the time in which they become available (i.e. there and then). Striving for understanding should not be a one-off activity but ongoing and continuous and part of one’s everyday activities. Finally, aiming for “quality of life” in the language classroom, EP recognises that classroom activity cannot be fully understood unless the research can situate what goes on in the classroom in the broader context of what is going on in participants’ lives outside of the classroom.

The following is a table of the Six Principles of EP and Two Practical suggestions from Allwright (2005: 360) as discussed in this section:

- Principle 1 *Put “quality of life” first.*
- Principle 2 *Work primarily to understand language classroom life.*
- Principle 3 *Involve everybody.*
- Principle 4 *Work to bring people together.*

\(^4\) All Italics in this sentence are mine.
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- Principle 5 *Work also for mutual development.*

- Principle 6 *Make the work a continuous enterprise.*

- Suggestion 1 *Minimize the extra effort of all sorts for all concerned.*

- Suggestion 2 *Integrate the “work for understanding” into the existing working life of the classroom.*

**Action for understanding**

EP calls for *action for understanding*\(^5\) to be taken by practitioner researchers as the starting point for their research as indicated in Principle 2 above. According to Allwright (2003: 123), however, action and understanding are not necessarily sequential activities but rather mutually supportive moments of an ongoing and never ending process of understanding. From this perspective, it is argued that the action that is taken is always based on some understanding that we possess as practitioners in the field and that the aim of choosing a specific action is so that we may *work with emerging understandings*\(^6\) (*ibid.*). The action that researchers may take to enhance their understanding may involve, but is not limited to, classroom activities of consciousness raising, peer or group discussions, heightened listening practices and the identification and repetition of routine classroom activities which may shed light on what we are trying to understand (*op. cit.* p. 124). Working with emerging understandings, on the other hand, may entail reflexive sharing of personal and collective understandings, problematizing notions of change and discussing the potential of subsequent moves or further action with all members of the EP community of practice. (*op. cit.* p. 125).

The following ProDAIT diagram (2006a) in Figure 4.3. compares the role of action and understanding in the three main approaches to Practitioner Research, i.e. that of Reflective Practice, Action Research and EP with a special focus on EP and action for understanding.

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\(^5\) My Italics.

\(^6\) My Italics.
In the diagram, Reflective Practice is described as a process of contemplation for understanding, whereas EP uses action for understanding and, finally, Action Research uses action to bring about change. In other words, Reflective Practice and EP both share the reflective dimension whereas EP and Action Research share action as their basic method albeit with different aims.⁷

**EP as an epistemological and ethical framework**

In his review of 15 years of EP as an approach to Practitioner Research, Allwright (2005) takes his thinking a step further by providing a discussion of EP not only as a set of principles (with practical implications) as discussed above but also as an

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⁷ The italics in this sentence are mine.
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epitomologically and ethically motivated framework in the field of language education. He writes (op. cit. p. 359):

“The thinking we have done in recent years has turned us away from technicism and towards considering EP as a form of practitioner research and has helped us find our own rationale for practitioner research—a rationale rooted in epistemological and ethical thinking rather than in thinking technically.” (Allwright, 2005: 359)

From Allwright’s discussion, Practitioner Research as it is developed by EP is not to be understood as a research method as such but is rather descriptive of a relationship of identity between the people being investigated and the people carrying out the investigation (op. cit. pp. 357-8). In other words, Practitioner Research can be viewed as a community of practice researching itself where both teachers and learners are considered to be part of the community. It is in this sense that the epistemology, i.e. the understanding of how knowledge is created, should not be separated from the ethical dimension or its impact on the people involved. The implications of this are that quality of life issues of practitioners and other members of the researched community are necessarily at the centre of the research. In this sense, the research focus will always be about understanding people and not solving a problem. It follows that the outcomes of research must be relevant first and foremost to people in the classroom community at the time they are produced and are not for researchers to generalise from at a later stage, though this of course may be a secondary outcome of the research process. It also follows that, if quality of classroom life is at the centre of the research, understanding can never be stable as it will vary with each research community and context. This resistance to the need to aim for high order generalisations in classroom research is made explicit by Allwright (op. cit. p. 359) when he says that Practitioner Research
needs to “look downwards” and “exploration means looking for deep human understandings rather than high-level scientific ones”. Allwright (ibid.) reinforces this need for research to constantly refer to the particular as the primary source of information for understanding by suggesting that, even when explanations fail us, the act of living our understandings\(^8\) or, in other words, our tacit understandings and the way we act as practitioners in teaching be a valid form of documenting understandings in Practitioner Research.

**Research design and methods in EP**

Allwright (2005: 359) argues that decisions about research method must be subordinated to thinking about the ethical and epistemological perspective of trying to understand life in language classrooms. In essence, he advocates the *Friends of the Earth* motto of “Think globally, act locally” whereby the practitioner researcher first needs to have a general idea of where he or she wants to go (thinking globally) and then should decide on appropriate methods in relation to this (act locally) (ibid.). I would therefore argue that it makes sense that the “action” for understanding of EP be incorporated in the research design by the researcher who will then be able to select specific data collection tools or methods which will reflect the research design and the context in which the research is being carried out. Indeed, if the ultimate outcome is about people/a specific learning community and their understandings, the research design will necessarily involve determining an action that can bring these to surface in the context in which they naturally play out. In this sense, the “action” for understanding which is at the heart of the EP framework can be considered as one of the key decisions the researcher will need to make in relation to his or her research project as it will have implications in terms of the methods that will ultimately be selected.

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\(^8\) My italics.
To conclude, it was not until I started framing what I was doing as Practitioner Research that I started to realise the extent to which EP was relevant to my understanding of what I was doing and the potential it carried in terms of developing and extending my methodological framework. It was as if I was using reflective practice but with greater impulse which derived from the specific “action” for understanding I had decided to take and which will be discussed in full in Section 4.5.4 on the Case Study below and in Chapter 5. Last but not least, I consider my encounter with EP as one of my major methodological breakthroughs as it enabled me to coherently bring together the various strands of the research project and gave a tighter methodological and epistemological framing to the exploratory case study which was to become the foundation of my research project.

4.4 Case Study Research

Similarly to my engagement with EP described in the section above, I first started to think about framing what I had done as a case study as a result of my ongoing process of questioning what I was doing. Indeed, upon completion of my major data generation and collection cycle and as I proceeded to organise my data for analysis, it became apparent that the data collected was clustered around a clearly identifiable and naturally occurring event: the development and the implementation of an online language course in the virtual world of Second Life. Only at that point did I realise that the process of the course design and the course implementation, and the grouping of data that was produced around these events, constituted a logical sequence of interrelated activities which, viewed as a whole, constituted a unit of some sort. It was if the data had plotted the existence of something I was not able to visualise in my initial approach to my research project. In other words, all of the pieces of data and all the activities that had been carried out since the inception of the research project, and during the data collection phase, belonged together logically and intimately thus arguably constituting
what the case-study research literature defines as a “unit of analysis” or “case” (e.g. Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Initially, I felt that to present my research project as a case study would principally contribute to providing an organisational and logical framework within which to discuss data collection. In addition, it seemed to me to be the most appropriate way of managing emerging complexity within a specific set of boundaries (Mason, 2002; Stake, 1995). Last but not least, I also felt that refraining from examining my data in terms of a case study might have carried with it the risk of ignoring what the data was saying to me. I therefore took it upon myself to at least consider what I had done in light of a case study framework.

And in fact, it was not long before I started to see implications, in terms of data analysis and my emergent understandings, of what at the outset had been an observation of a purely organisational nature. Indeed, once I had gained this understanding of a whole and was able to see the existence of a meaningful and logical unit with which I could work, I was also able to start to identify relevant issues in relation to my study of participation and move more swiftly onto the analysis phase. Indeed, the Case Study research literature (e.g. Tellis, 1997a; Stake, 1995) highlights the importance of identifying a unit of analysis as a means of enabling the researcher to focus on one or two of the issues that are central to understanding the phenomenon or system under investigation. Yin (2009), with reference to the unit of analysis, also speaks of the importance it plays in creating a chain of evidence linking the research protocol to the research outcomes thus paving the way for analysis proper. As far as my research project was concerned, the identification of the course design and implementation as the two key processes of my case study enabled me to come to terms with the idea of participation as a phenomenon which was part and parcel of a course rather than merely incidental to it. Indeed, I realised that my unit of analysis of my research was not participation or student interaction per se and in isolation as I had initially thought, but
rather the course in both its developmental and implementation stage. In other words, the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon were not at all clear cut and easy to determine (cf. Duff, 2008; Gillham, 2000; Hood, 2007; Mason, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). In short, the Talkademy Business English Course emerged as my naturally occurring and naturally delimited case where, according to my Research Protocol, I had predicted participation to materialize for observation and discussion. A case-study approach would thus allow me to capture context and phenomenon together in a meaningful way.

From a research methodology perspective, the implication of this shift in understanding was that describing and exploring the context became just as important as describing participation. In other words, my context was no longer just the backdrop to my research questions but part of the puzzle in understanding participation. It was at that point that I made the research decision to give equal weight to the context in my research by ensuring that the context became part of and was fully integrated into the data set. Indeed, the case study came into being when the context shifted from playing a marginal role to a central one. Subsequently, I also realised that this shift in focus would also lead me to want to look back at my research protocol and re-examine it in light of some of the underlying assumptions I had made. In particular, for example, I asked myself whether in failing to see participation embedded to such a full extent in the specific context, I had somehow overlooked, played down, misrepresented – or worse, misunderstood – my own role in relation to participation as I was also clearly part of the context. And if so, what where the implications for my research? Indeed, and in line with qualitative research approaches and reflexivity (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Dornyei, 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Mason, 2002; L. Richards, 2009), my new understandings were used to go back and revisit what I had already done as part of an ongoing process of moving backwards and forwards within my research project.
In conclusion, I would like to argue that, while my core methodological approach did not undergo any procedural changes from inception to the implementation phase of the research project, the framing of my research within the requirements of case study research allowed for new understandings to emerge. As such, the case study not only provided me with an organisational framework but also with a thinking framework which enabled me to feed new questions and understandings into my analysis. This is in line with the case study literature where it is argued that case study research is more than just a presentation and collation of data as a case and that for it to qualify as research it also has to prove that it has contributed to analysis (e.g. Yin, 2009).

4.4.1 Case studies

A case study is a form of naturalistic or empirical enquiry with a holistic approach to the exploration of a real life situation or contemporary phenomenon in context (e.g. Cousin 2009; Gillham, 2000; Johansson 2003; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Case studies allow for a systematic framing of an event or related events which are partially processed or captured by a variety of data generation and collection methods for analysis and discussion as a whole or a unit (Yin, 2009). The specific aim of Case Study Research is to offer a complete and detailed description of real life phenomenon as it takes place (Gillham, 2000; Johansson, 2003) and which is feasible and reasonable at the time for the researcher to capture in view of the environmental and logistic constraints within which they will be operating (Yin, 2009). The case may include a one-off event or be a chronological narrative of a sequence of events (Yin, 2009). The ultimate aim of the case is to provide a reasoned, plausible and trustworthy account and discussion of the event in relation to the project’s rationale and with reference to debate in the field (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, by providing a snapshot of a certain real life phenomenon as it occurs, the case may also be compared to, or compiled with, other comparable instances of the phenomenon reported in the literature (Stake, 1995). In
other words, the understandings or explanations that are reached as a result of this process can be viewed as a contribution to current state-of-the-art knowledge and thinking in the field. The final report of the case study can be seen as an attempt to stabilise knowledge generated around an event after it has taken place.

It is argued in the literature that case studies are not easy to define, not least because they are a hybrid research method (Nunan, 1992: 74). Nunan (ibid.), for example, says that case studies are methodologically a ‘hybrid’ in that they generally utilise a range of methods for collecting and analysing data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure. Similarly, McKay (2006: 71) notes: “Case studies are one of the more difficult methodologies to define because they can vary in focus and research data”.

However, the tendency to use more than one source of data or data of different types to inform the research question is a generally accepted approach in qualitative researching and can be also seen as a way of contributing to triangulation, descriptive thoroughness and “thickness” and researcher transparency (e.g. Mason, 2002).

In addition to this, one could argue that case studies are a hybrid when compared to other research procedures in the sense that they are not limited to the generation of either qualitative or quantitative data and that they can be used creatively and flexibly in lots of different contexts and to multiple ends. Indeed, as Trochim (2006: para 5) points out “There is no single way to conduct a case study, and a combination of methods (e.g., unstructured interviewing, direct observation) can be used”. One might also argue that there is implicit recognition by researchers in the field that the phenomenon under investigation is complex and, as such, requires a variety of investigative approaches. Whatever the reason, however, the ultimate aim of all case studies is to get closer to a certain phenomenon by providing a reliable and systematic account of its nature be it in qualitative or quantitative terms and of the context in which it manifests itself.
Finally, several researchers point out that qualitative case studies are similar in many ways to ethnographic approaches to research (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Duff, 2008; Nunan, 1992; van Lier, 2005). These similarities can be found essentially in the attention to detail in the description of context and in the use of reflexive practices as a result of the researcher’s role as interpreter of events in the study. The main differences between the two approaches are to be found in a narrower focus of case studies on the one hand, and in the explicit interest on behalf of ethnographic studies on cultural aspects of the context under study.

As far as my own research project was concerned, I would like to argue that my narrower focus (i.e. the use of a case study rather than an ethnographic study) was justified insofar as I already possessed extensive professional experience of the educational context and of the virtual world environment. I felt that this knowledge could be successfully brought to bear on my project through my detailed descriptions and accounts of the broader context and that additional and longer time in the field would not have enhanced my understanding of the field in any meaningful way. In other words, as a member of the community I was researching, a narrow time and data collection framework were considered the best way to maximise knowledge with reference to my research question. In addition, my research project clearly was focussed on unravelling some of the language learning and teaching dynamics of a specific context rather than on providing cultural insights into a learning community which, as discussed in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 above, was brought into existence through my own actions and did not exist independently of my own teaching and learning context as is often the case in fully-fledged ethnographic studies.

4.4.2 Case study research

There is much debate in the case study literature over whether case studies are a method for research to be used in combination with other methods or sub-methods (Gillham,
2000) or constitute a fully-fledged methodology in their own right (Yin, 2003; 2009). Creswell (2009), for example, refers to case studies as a research strategy\(^9\) rather than a method. Indeed, of all the approaches to research, it certainly appears to be the one that requires greater justification or discussion by researchers. More importantly, however, some researchers advocate for a clear distinction to be made between case study as method and case study research\(^10\) (Cousin 2009; Yin 2009;). The argument for case study research rather than case studies as method is that a case study as it stands on its own is merely an example of “good” or “best” practice and does not have implications beyond the case itself (Cousin, 2009: 131). It is argued that it is only through systematic and theoretical engagement with the case study that research outcomes can be produced (Yin, 2009). In other words, the case study needs to be more than just a description or an example of an event and must be able to function as an analytical tool (Mason, 2002; Yin, 2009) on the one hand, and contribute substantially to the research outcomes in terms of theory building (Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2009) or analytic generalisations (Dornyei, 2007; Duff, 2008; Johansson, 2003; McKay, 2006) on the other.

### 4.4.3 Building the case

The case study provides the research project with what Yin (2009) refers to as the chain of evidence which the researcher follows from his or her initial proposition or hypothesis to the conclusions. Indeed, the most common recommendations for ensuring that the case study reaches a methodological level to qualify as a producer of research outcomes is that it be logically connected to the rationale or proposition of the project on the one hand as stated in the Research Protocol and contribute substantially to the project’s external validity or generalisability on the other (McKay, 2006; Yin, 2009). Mason (2002: 41) refers to this process in relation to qualitative research as the logic of argument which needs to be made as explicit and sound as possible so that others can

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\(^9\) My italics.

\(^10\) My italics.
appreciate the conclusions and outcomes which have been reached. The onus of carrying out this process of “building the case” is very much on the researcher and constitutes one of the principal research activities of case study. In sum, the building of a case has implications both in terms of internal and external validity as it provides the external reader or evaluator with the logic for the case and information about the extent to which the case can adequately inform both the research project and other cases.

4.4.4 Case studies in qualitative research projects

Case study projects can be used in a variety of research settings and respond to the researcher’s need to collect and collate both quantitative and qualitative data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). However, case studies undeniably lend themselves particularly well to the needs of qualitative research as they provide the researcher with a means to focus on the particular (e.g. Dörnyei, 2007; Stake, 1995; 2005). In addition, in qualitative research projects where data is collected from multiple sources and captured in different formats, a case study may offer the qualitative researcher a useful framework for the organization and analysis of multiple data. For example, Mason (2002: 166) describes case studies as a holistic sequence organised around a range of data sources. She argues for the use of a case study in qualitative research in particular as an analytical handle when the data set is complex and needs to be studied as a whole and context is important. In particular, she states (op. cit. p. 165) that this is likely to occur when non cross-sectional forms of data organisation are required, i.e. when the data set does not lend itself to analysis via indexing categories as the parts of the context that are being studied are interwoven and highly complex.

In qualitative research it might be that the case is identified from the very beginning of the project and included in the Research Protocol, or the type of case that is necessary might be identified and part of the project will involve finding a case that meets the required profile (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, the case study framework might emerge as a
result of the research process itself (reflexivity) and subsequently go on to play a primary role at the data management and analysis stage (Hood, 2009; Mason, 2002). Finally, even when the case has been clearly identified, it may also be that the researcher does not have access to it. It is with this in mind that case study research also needs to come to terms with the logistics of gathering data from a specific context (Cousin, 2009; Yin, 2009). In this sense, for a case study to be valid it also has to be feasible (Yin, 2009). Tellis (1997a: 6) points out that an important criterion in selecting a case is that it is able to maximise what can be learnt in the period available for the study.

In the following sections, I will look at a variety of issues which are at the heart of case study research in general with reference to specific needs, procedures and the epistemology of qualitative research. These will include the use of single case studies rather than multiple case studies, identifying and binding the case, theorising and theory building, the description of context, transparency and trustworthiness, case study methods, triangulation, ethics and the researcher’s role.

4.4.5 Single case studies

In qualitative inquiry in particular, case study research often makes use of a single case design. This is in contrast with a multiple case design which tends to follow a repetition logic of certain research projects (Yin, 1994; 2009) where the aim is to look for similarities between comparable events and to confirm typicality of a phenomenon. According to Yin (1994), single cases are used rather to confirm or challenge a theory, or to represent a unique or extreme case. In fact, where the aim is to provide an in-depth account of a unique phenomenon, arguably a single case study may afford the best research response in terms of the breadth of representation and the depth of analysis it is able to afford. A similar view is supported by Stake (1995: xi) when he says that a case study is expected to capture the complexities of a single case. Furthermore, Yin argues
(2009) that single-case studies are also ideal for revelatory cases where an observer may have access to a phenomenon that was previously inaccessible or generally unknown. Yin (2009) continues by pointing out that single-case designs require careful investigation to avoid misrepresentation and to maximize the investigator's access to the evidence as it is limited to one case only.

4.4.6 Identifying and binding the case

The identification and presentation of the case is probably the most important research tasks for an investigator in case study research. As argued by Nunan (1992: 74), the decision itself whether a study amounts to a case study is not straightforward in any way. As a starting point, we need to decide whether the event we have selected, or which we have envisioned as being relevant to our research, constitutes a valid unit of analysis.11 (Johannson, 2003; Yin, 2009). Indeed, the definition of what constitutes a whole and what makes something a case may be an issue the researcher needs to problematise (Mason 2002: 167). In addition, I would like to argue that it is not enough for the study or event to have natural boundaries as a unit in the real world context to be considered as a whole or a unit of analysis for the research project. For example, in educational contexts, the fact that a course or a single lesson can be considered as a whole or as a unit of some sort does not automatically mean that they constitute a case for case study research. Of course, it may well be that the case that has been chosen is indeed a naturally defined case in the real world beyond the context of the research project and that it can be taken as it stands as a single instance of some bound system (McKay 2006; Smith, 1998 cited in Stake, 1995:2; Yin 2009) or as the naturally occurring life cycle of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen and Manion, 1985: 120 cited in Nunan, 1992: 77). However, it may also be that boundaries round a phenomenon have to be placed by the researcher for the purposes of the study. Indeed,

11 My Italics.
part of the process of selecting a case is indeed *binding the case* (Baxter and Jack, 2008) or describing the boundaries within which data is to be collected and the extent to which this is representative or descriptive of a whole or a *bounded system* (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Hood, 2009; Merriam, 1988). Tellis’ (1997a: 6) definition of the unit of analysis as a *system of action*\(^\text{12}\) enables us to identify and take into consideration cases which, for example, are not only defined by individuals or groups of people (*cf.* Hood, 2007; Gillham, 2000; Stake, 1995) but by other unifying characteristics such as an activity.

At the next level, once we have established that the case meets the criteria of a “unit”, we need to determine why the case is interesting and relevant to the research project. Stake (1995), for example, claims we may be interested in case studies for both their uniqueness and commonality thus combining both the need for a case to be unique to some extent and yet typical at the same time. I would argue that the collocation along the typical-unique continuum will depend on the aims of the case study as stated in the case study’s Research Protocol. The extent to which the case which has been selected fits in with either definition (uniqueness vs commonality) will be another area that will require discussion and justification by the researcher. In other words, I would like to suggest that the researcher ultimately needs to look at the case not so much in terms of what is an example of and what it represents but rather, more specifically, in terms of what the case can do for the research project. In this sense, the researcher will have to consider issues such as the project’s aims, the research questions and the rationale of the case. Finally, it may be that the boundaries of the case may emerge more clearly as a result of a first round of analysis (*e.g.* Hood, 2009) as it so happened with my case study as described above in Section 4.4.

\(^{12}\) My italics.
4.4.7 Theory Building and generalisability

In the Case Study research literature there is much discussion around the role played by theory and, in particular, around the extent to which the outcomes of case studies, in view of the singularity and particularity of many case studies, can be generalised to other contexts (e.g. Creswell, 2009; 2013; Chapelle and Duff, 2003; Duff, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2000; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). It can be argued that this discussion reflects the more general debate between positivist and quantitative research traditions, on the one hand, and qualitative and interpretative research traditions on the other (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Heigham and Croker, 2007; Mason, 2002; Stake, 1995). According to this debate, research in the positivist tradition has a clear requirement that research outcomes be applicable to a general population while research outcomes in the interpretative research traditions are used to inform about reality in terms of its complexity and variety rather than in terms of generalisations. Indeed, Lincoln and Guba go to the extent of asserting that in qualitative research “the only generalisation is that there is no generalisation” (2000: 27-44). In his discussion on the importance of theory and theory development in Case Study research, Yin (2009) points to the need to aim more specifically for what he refers to as analytic generalisation whereby the generalisations that can be made in Case Study research are dependent on the theoretical implications of the study or, in other words, the extent to which the case study outcomes can be related\(^{13}\) to existing theory. In this sense, generalisation is understood as engagement with theory at the end of the research project. A similar understanding of the role of theory also constitutes the thrust of Grounded Theory where the argument that one can make can only be determined by analysing the data and not beforehand (e.g. Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Glaser and

\(^{13}\) My italics.
The nature of theoretical claims that can be made in Case Study research are summarised by Cousin (2009: 134-136) who explains that, while generalisations are not the aim of Case Study Research, certain types of generalisation are nevertheless possible. For example, in discussing Stake’s (1995) notions of “petite” and “grand” generalisations in Case Study research, Cousin (ibid.) explains how Case Study research may produce limited or “petite” claims that can then be discussed in relation to pre-existing “grand” generalisations. Again, in reference to Stake’s (1995) discussion of “naturalistic” generalisations, she explains how the wealth of readable detail and analysis of case studies may lead the reader to experience the case as if they had been there themselves and, as such, they are in a position to make a judgement about the case. Cousin (ibid.) also refers to Bassey’s (1998, 1999) proposal that the term “fuzzy” generalisations be used with reference to the outcomes of Case Study research as a way of capturing their relative nature. In sum, while case study research cannot be conclusive in its claims and provide us with “grand” generalisations or theories, it can nevertheless contribute to our understanding by providing us with certain contextual information that can be related to other knowledge and about which some “fuzzy” or tentative claims can be made. Freeman (2009) makes a similar statement about the findings of qualitative research in general. He says (op.cit. p. 36) that the reason why qualitative research refers to its conclusions as “claims” is due to the fact that the term captures both the balance and the interaction between being definite about what you find and being open-ended about what you can still speculate on.

To conclude, while there is a general consensus that generalisability as it is understood in the positivist research tradition of applying results to a general population is not a desired outcome of Case Study research (Cousin, 2009; Duff, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), I would like to add that case studies, including single case studies, are, nevertheless, able to contribute to the building or development of theory by providing
us a with a documentation of reality that can be linked to an existing body of knowledge. However, I would argue that the ability of Case Study research to achieve this is dependent on the individual case at hand and the researcher’s skill in bringing out the significance of the case in relation to a broader context.

4.4.8 Describing the context

The context in which the event or phenomenon occurs is a primary research interest of Case Study research (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Duff, 2008; Hood, 2009; Gillham, 2000; Richards, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003; 2009). As a result, the provision of a detailed account or, rather, of what is referred to as a “thick description” of the context (Mason, 2002; Hood, 2009), is one of the main features of Case Study research (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Duff, 2008; Hood, 2007; Gillham, 2000; Richards, 2011; Stake, 1995) and one which it shares with qualitative research in general (e.g. Hood, 2009; Gillham, 2000; Merriam, 1988). As discussed in Section 4.4.6, the task of the Case Study researcher will be to define the boundaries of the context and to be explicit as to what is going to be included in the discussion of context and what is going to be excluded as part of the process of binding the case. In addition, the Case Study research literature highlights how the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and its context are also often not easy to determine (e.g. Hood, 2009; Yin, 2009) thus making the provision of detailed descriptions all the more imperative in the interest of research validity in general. A detailed description of the context of my case study is provided in Chapter 5.

4.4.9 Transparency and trustworthiness

Not only do detailed descriptions of a phenomenon and its context provide the research project with descriptive data but, together with reflexivity as discussed by Hood (2009), they play a role in building the case through the creation of a clear trail of evidence (Yin, 2009) thus substantially contributing to the research requirement of
“transparency” (Mason, 2002). The need for transparency in qualitative research projects is based on the argument that the more information about content and processes that is available, the easier it is for fellow researchers, and the research community at large, to access and appreciate the qualitative research project as a whole (Yin, 2009). Transparency can also be considered as contributing to “trustworthiness” of the research or the extent to which others can rely on it to be a valid piece of research (Hood, 2009; Rallis and Rossman, 2009).

### 4.4.10 Case study methods

Johansson (2003: 2) argues that cases should be investigated in their natural contexts with a multitude of methods. Indeed, the use of different investigative approaches is justified in the case study research literature as a means of providing the researcher with multiple perspectives on what is going on (Stake, 2005). Case study methodology applied to qualitative research can make use of a variety of data collection methods (e.g. Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Duff, 2008; Hood, 2009; McKay, 2006). Thus, in general, and similarly to qualitative research approaches, case studies will privilege data collection methods that will allow the researcher to explore, describe and build the case in considerable detail. These may include, inter-alia, interviews, questionnaires, audio and video recordings of events, classroom observations, direct observation, participant observation, field notes, narrative accounts, diaries, verbal reports, written documents and visual data, archival records, physical artefacts, research journals, numerical and patterned data (list compiled and adapted from Cousin: 141-146; Creswell, 2009: 178-183; Duff, 2008: 127-130; Hood, 2007; McKay, 2006: 71; Yin, 2009: 101-105).

Typically, a case study in qualitative research will often also blend a description of events with the analysis of them (Hood, 2009; McKay, 2006; Stake, 1995). This tendency for data collection and analysis to converge in qualitative research turns the data collection process into a fully fledged research activity in which the researcher is
called upon to play a primary role (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Mason 2002). This, in turn, limits the extent to which the data collection process can be delegated to others or processed via automatic data collecting methods in qualitative research and places the researcher in a the delicate position of having significant impact on the process itself against which he or she will need to guard via additional research strategies such as reflexivity. The data collection and analysis methods used within my study will be described in detail in Chapter 6

4.4.11 Triangulation

In general, the use of more than one method or data source in research as a means of corroborating results that have already been established by another research method or source is referred to as triangulation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Mason, 2002; Nunan, 1992; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). In view of the aim of Case Study research to build a complex and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the use of multiple methods for data collection are generally considered one of its main characteristics (Cousin, 2009; Ghillam, 2000; Stake, 1995). Tellis (1997a) goes as far as claiming that case studies are a triangulated research strategy by definition insofar as the deployment of multiple data collection methods is its main defining characteristic. However, I would like to suggest that, while case study research generally employs multiple methods for data collection, this requirement may have more to do with the nature of Case Study research and its need to compile a multi-perspective understanding of the case from different sources of evidence rather than with a pre-determined characteristic of Case Study research itself. In his discussion of triangulation of data from multiple sources of evidence, Yin (2009: 116-117) makes the distinction between two conditions: convergence of evidence and non-convergence of evidence as illustrated in Figure 4.4. Multiple sources of evidence that “converge” will confirm a fact of the research project that has already been established and, as such,
contribute substantially to the overall validity of the research. Sources of evidence that “do not converge” are limited to providing the research project with additional information but are not able to confirm an established outcome of the project. As such, according to Yin (ibid.) non-convergent forms of triangulation are limited in terms of the contribution they can make to the project’s validity.

Figure 4.4: Convergence and Non-convergence of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009: 117).

However, the debate in the field of qualitative and mixed-methods research, arguably places looser demands on triangulation compared to Yin’s (2009) discussion above and suggests that the aim of using multiple methods and/or data sources in research is to
strengthen and corroborate research _claims_\textsuperscript{14} rather than facts (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2007; Mason, 2002). In relation to qualitative case study research, Hood (2007: 81) argues that triangulation is not meant to be confirmative and that is rather used to gain the broadest and deepest possible view of an issue from different perspectives and, as such, operates to demonstrate the complexity of the issue and the contradictory ways of viewing it. From this perspective, it is argued that the challenge for the researcher is the successful integration of multiple methods and data sources (Duff, 2007: 44; Mason, 2002: 33). Furthermore, Mason (2002: 190-191) argues that different methods applied to qualitative data may well deliver results and understandings that cannot be considered identical to those achieved with other approaches. Indeed, it can be argued that the lack of confirmation of initial results that may arise from triangulation does not necessarily invalidate these initial results and may well be ascribed simply to the different method used. Mason also claims (ibid.) that, where the aim is to describe complexity and understand diversity, it does not really make sense for the research project to attempt a replication of results via another method, as this will not add to the body of knowledge in any significant way. Finally, we are cautioned that the use of multiple methods should not be taken as a face value contribution to validity (Mason, 2002: 191). In view of the above, it is suggested that triangulation in qualitative research be used as a contribution towards validity in a more general sense and that the aim of adopting more than one method be to provide either supplementary or complementary information in the interest of understanding complexity at a deeper level. Creswell (2009:191-192) lists a number of strategies that

\textsuperscript{14} My Italics.
can be employed in qualitative research as part of a more general approach to triangulation in the interest of validity and reliability of the research project in general. These include:

1) the use of different data sources of information;
2) checking findings with members or participants in the research project;
3) the use of rich and thick descriptions to convey the findings;
4) clarification or research bias;
5) presenting negative or discrepant findings;
6) spending prolonged time in the field in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study;
7) peer-debriefing or discussing the outcomes with others to check for alternate interpretations;
8) the use of an external auditor with no connection to the researcher and the research project.

In this sense, triangulation can be viewed as impacting on validity indirectly by contributing to the thickness of description and trustworthiness of the account\(^\text{15}\) rather than following a replication of results logic as suggested by Yin (2009) above. Indeed, the literature on triangulation and qualitative case study research highlights not only how triangulation can be of different types but that it can take place in different ways. For example, Snow and Anderson (1991 cited in Tellis, 1997b: np) assert that triangulation can occur with data, investigators, theories, and even methodologies. Stake (1995: 109) takes this further by stating that even the research protocols that are used to ensure accuracy and account for alternative explanations may be understood as a form of triangulation. Finally, I would like to suggest that triangulation in qualitative case study research be understood more as a methodological approach similar to reflexivity.

\(^\text{15}\) My Italics.
based on a combination of research strategies and on the deployment of any number of validity checks in the interest of complexity and thoroughness rather than confirmation of results. Triangulation in this research project is achieved through the combination of the thick description of the case provided in Chapter 5, my general reflexive approach to the entire research project and the time I have spent in the field both as a result of my direct involvement with the case study and as a virtual world practitioner and researcher. In addition triangulation in this research project is provided via the use of different data collection methods and sources as discussed in detail in Chapter 6 and through the adoption of the EP approach which allows for the exploration of the research topic from the perspectives of all involved.

4.4.12 Researcher roles and bias

Yin argues (2009: 46) that in case study research, where procedures have not yet been codified (op. cit. p. 26) or routinized (op. cit. p. 46), the intellectual and emotional demands placed on a case study researchers are far greater than in other research methods. In addition, Yin claims (ibid.) that the continuous interaction between the theoretical issues being studied and the data collection requires that the researcher be particularly skilled. In particular, Yin (op. cit. p. 69) recommends that the researcher be able to ask good questions, be a good listener, be adaptive and flexible, have a firm grasp of the issues being studied and be sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence. This understanding of the researcher’s role in the research project is very similar to that advocated within qualitative research (e.g. Alvesson and Skölberg, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2009; Mason, 2002; L. Richards, 2009). With reference to qualitative case study research, in particular, where there is a tendency for researchers to be intimately connected with the research participants and the setting, Hood (2009: 85) recommends that case study researchers be explicitly reflective about the role they play from the start to the end of the research project.
On the basis of what has been discussed so far in this section on Case Study Research, key research moments for the case study researcher can be seen to include:

1. Identifying the case. Describing the case and justifying it in relation to the project’s aims.
2. Building the case. This is achieved through thick descriptions and by making the connections between data and analysis very clear.
3. Theory building. This is dependent on how the case has been identified and built.
4. Capturing researcher bias and discussing one’s role openly in each phase of the project.

In addition, Robson (1993) discusses some of the advantages of case studies used by practitioners in Practitioner Research. Robson (ibid.) claims that practitioners possess insider knowledge about the context and have direct and readily available opportunities for implementation. In addition, they may draw on the practitioner-researcher synergy which stems from their double role of practitioner and researcher. These advantages combined together place the practitioner researcher in a good position to pose research questions and identify research issues of particular significance. However, while the investigation of one’s own practice has the potential, on the one hand, of providing highly contextualised, insightful and relevant information, there is a constant risk that the researcher’s view will limit the scope of the research. Indeed, while there is a general appreciation of the importance and power of subjectivity within the qualitative research tradition, it can also be argued that subjectivity needs to be artfully managed in order to do justice to the investigation. In conclusion, for Practitioner Research to amount to more than just reflective practice, the practitioner’s role needs to be discussed thoroughly and analysed systematically in relation to the context and the events. For example, McKay (2006: 78), in her discussion of ethnographic approaches to
Classroom Research, discusses the need for research to provide a holistic account of what it going on. This is achieved, she argues (*ibid.*), by ensuring that the researcher combines both the etic view (i.e. that of the researcher practitioner) and the emic view (i.e. that of those who are being observed) in the research project.

**4.4.13 Case study ethics**

Closely related to the topic of researcher bias is that of researcher ethics in qualitative case studies. In qualitative research where the researcher is often physically close to the people or the context which is the focus of their investigation (i.e. as with participant observer roles for example or in observing his or her own practice as it relates to a specific phenomenon), the researcher’s role(s) needs to be clearly described not only in the interest of the discussion of results but also in the interest of transparency towards other people participating or involved in the project. Furthermore, with single case studies, specific ethical considerations arising from context of the particular “case” may also emerge and researchers may want to consider creating, and following, a tailored set of ethical guidelines rather than accepting the standard ethical requirements used for research in similar cases. In addition, when working with a small number of participants as is often the case with single case studies, it is important that a strong relationship of trust be built between the researcher and the people she is working with (Duff, 2008: 149). This means, on the one hand, that the chances of the researcher’s work being nullified by students not participating or pulling out of the study are reduced and, on the other, that there is an affective framework in place to deal with the risk of participants feeling coerced or pressured into taking part in the research. In addition, Dörnyei (2007: 68) points out that with detailed descriptions and high levels of contextualisation that are typical of qualitative case study research projects, caution may need to be exercised so that what at the outset might seem like general information about the case cannot be used to identify the participants at a later stage. However, building on Johnson and
Christensen (2004 cited in Dörnyei, 2007: 70) it is suggested that, in educational contexts, the benefits of students taking part in the project are, in general, so great and the risks so low that a lower ethical threshold might be more appropriate.

4.4.14 Types of case studies

The literature on case study research identifies several types of case studies depending on the number of cases involved, the duration of the study and, most importantly, the purpose of the study (e.g. Baxter and Jack, 2008; Cousin, 2009; Duff, 2008; Hood, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin 2003, 2009). The following table is adapted from Baxter and Jack (2008: 547-549) with additions from Yin (2009).

**Table 4.1: Types of case studies.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of case study</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Application/rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single case study (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A single case study is a study that makes use of one case only.</td>
<td>Single case studies are used when they are representative of a situation or either critical, unique or revelatory in some way. They can be used to describe, explain and explore issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple case study (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A multiple case study makes use of more than one case.</td>
<td>Multiple case studies have a replication logic. They are used to make original findings from one case more robust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal case study</td>
<td>A longitudinal case study is one that studies the same case at different points in time.</td>
<td>To study change and development in context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Yin, 2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic (Stake, 1995)</td>
<td>An intrinsic case study is usually a case we have been given. For example, a particular class might be having trouble reaching certain learning goals and as part of our teaching job we are required to find out why. In this instance, our interest in the case is intrinsic.</td>
<td>We are interested in this specific case for what it can tell us about what is going on. We want to understand this case, this issue, this problem. There is no interest in using the intrinsic case study to learn about other cases or to generalise to other cases at least at the outset of our investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental (Stake, 1995)</td>
<td>We choose the case on the grounds that we believe it can be instrumental or useful to answering our research question or the issue under investigation.</td>
<td>An instrumental case study is one we use when we want to understand an issue that is of interest to us or which we are required to investigate. The case may be used to generalise about other cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative or typical case study</td>
<td>The case describes a typical or average situation from everyday life.</td>
<td>The purpose of the case is to provide information about the phenomenon or situation which is either typical or representative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A critical case is one that is suitable for the testing of a well formulated theory. It meets all the conditions for testing the theory.</td>
<td>To determine whether a certain theory’s propositions are correct or whether an alternative explanation is more relevant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A unique or extreme case is one that describes a rare occurrence.</td>
<td>To document a unique or rare phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelatory case study (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A revelatory case study is a case study that provides information about a phenomenon which was previously inaccessible.</td>
<td>Revelatory case studies provide access to knowledge about a situation which has never been exposed before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>A descriptive case study provides a detailed and broad description of an event.</td>
<td>To describe a phenomenon in context. The description may be relevant as an example of a typical, critical, unique or revelatory case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>An explanatory case study is one which attempts to explain and discuss causes of an event or phenomenon.</td>
<td>To explain a phenomenon in context in relation to its causes.</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory (Yin, 2009)</td>
<td>An exploratory case study is one that explores a topic. The exploration will have the general purpose of finding out more about a topic.</td>
<td>To explore an issue or topic when it is not possible or desirable to establish propositions at the outset of the research project. Exploratory case studies are used, for example, when little is known about the topic or when it is not possible to determine the outcomes in advance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table above it would appear there is some room for overlap between the different types of case studies and it is reasonable to conceive of case studies that may have more than one purpose within a research project. As Yin (2009: 26) points out, the fact that case study research designs have not yet been codified leaves room for further modifications and improvements in future research.
4.4.15 Exploratory case studies

Once I had decided that a Case Study framework was the research methodology that best translated the work I was carrying out, it was not long before I started to see my specific case study as falling under the description of an exploratory case study as provided by Yin (2009) and listed in Table 4.1. In addition, recent discussion in the SLA literature with reference to qualitative research highlights the need for case studies which can be used to gain insight into phenomena when it is assumed that looking for causal relationships is of no scientific value in view of the high number of variables involved, the complexity of the phenomenon and/or the lack of understanding of the phenomenon (Chapelle and Duff, 2003; Duff, 2008; Hood, 2009; van Lier, 2005). It is easy to see how an exploratory case study as described by Yin (2009) fits in well with this specific call from the field of Applied Linguistics. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that exploratory case studies can be both descriptive and representative of a certain reality at the same time. In addition, it can be argued that exploratory case studies in qualitative research can also be viewed as explanatory although not in the narrow positivist sense of establishing causal relationships between variables but in the humanist tradition (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Mason, 2002) of looking for patterns and deep understanding. Yin (2009: 37) notes that, while exploratory case studies may start with a limited theoretical framework of reference, this does not mean that theory has no role within these studies. Yin (ibid.) goes on to point out that even exploratory case studies should be preceded by research statements about what is to be explored, the purpose of the exploration and criteria by which the exploration will be judged successful. In other words, while exploratory case studies may appear to be loosely constructed, they nevertheless operate within a clear theoretical framework. Finally, in comparing explanatory and exploratory case studies, Yin (op. cit: 177-178)
points out that in the first case, theory makes use of a causal argument, whereas, in the latter case, theory is used to evaluate the need for further investigation.

4.5 The Case Study

Contrary to my initial plan of observing a course run by others, my involvement with the *Talkademy Business English Course* at the heart of my case study saw me take on the triple role of course designer, teacher and researcher. Furthermore, it was only once I had embarked upon my research and through reflexivity that the contours of my case and my different roles became fully clear to me. Indeed, it was through the combined activity of *acting* as suggested by EP and *reflecting* upon my acting that I was able to start building my case. At the same time, and in a cyclical fashion, as the case emerged and the stronger the contours became, the easier it became for me to see how the different parts related to the whole. It was as if, by bringing things together it became possible to see different aspects of the parts. The collection of the various activities I was involved in provided me with a greater context within which to view what I was doing. The broader the context, the clearer the different roles of the parts became. In particular, I gained a deeper understanding of the following four areas of my project. Firstly I gained clarity of how the *Talkademy Business English Course* fitted into my research project and of the Research and Development (R&D) role it played for Talkademy; secondly I developed an understanding of the broader context of my research project and was able to align it with the research tradition of Classroom Research; thirdly, I developed a greater understanding of the role of the virtual world platform within my research project; finally, I was able to see to what an even greater extent some of the tenets of EP were relevant to my research project. These emergent understandings and their implications in relation to my research project are discussed in the following sections.
4.5.1 The Talkademy R&D cycle

Shortly after embarking upon my initial building of the case through reflexivity, I realised that my exploratory case study contained within it an Action Research cycle (e.g. Burns, 2009; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2003) the implications of which I had been totally oblivious to at the outset of my research project. Indeed, my case study coincided with the second cycle of the R&D process of Talkademy. In this sense, my case study was part of the R&D of a third party and my invitation to teach the course constituted the change factor Talkademy was introducing into its course as part of this process. As discussed above in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 on Practitioner Research, Action Research cycles involve the introduction of change as part of the research process. It was at this point that I realised that a full account of my case would necessarily have to include the larger context of which it was part and that my discussion could not overlook, in the interest of my narrative and thoroughness, the different aims of the course and the relationship between these aims and myself and my multiple roles. In short, my research project involved two types of “acting” as far as I was concerned: the first was my “acting for understanding” which was the basis of my research project and entailed my involvement in the R&D proposal presented to me by Talkademy; the second was “developing and teaching the course for a third party” which was in line with Talkademy’s development aims. Figure 4.5 below illustrates the intersection between my research project and two of the courses run by Talkademy as part of their ongoing R&D into virtual world language education. Only one preceding course and one subsequent course have been included in the diagram as token examples to represent the R&D continuum of the Talkademy course delivery. However, it needs to be noted that the course I was involved in was one of many courses run by Talkademy since its foundation and that there have been several courses since. However, the R&D process of Talkademy is not the focus of this research project and is mentioned here and in
Chapter 5 purely in the interest of clarity and as contextual information. The following figure represents the intersection between the research project and the Talkademy R&D cycle.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4.5:** The research project and the Talkademy R&D process.

### 4.5.2 Classroom Research

The second major development in my understanding of what I was doing with reference to my research project was the realisation that, while I was indeed collecting data about participation in language learning in virtual worlds, I was arguably doing so within the broader framework and tradition of Classroom Research. In other words, I soon became aware that so much of what I was doing amounted to observing and to collecting data about the classroom and classroom interaction in particular albeit in a virtual world. It was at that point that I experienced what I have called the process of “de-virtualisation” of my research. It was as if the virtual world, with its immersive properties, had put up a mist or a barrier to my vision of what I was doing leading me to think that I was doing something other than carrying out research in the foreign language classroom. As soon
Chapter 4 - Methodology

as it became clear to me that my research was a form of Classroom Research within Applied Linguistics (e.g. Dörnyei, 2007; McKay, 2006; Nunan, 1992), I suddenly felt authorised to more fully embrace this field in my research and to account for its understandings and research traditions with my project. Last but not least, the de-virtualisation of what I was doing enabled me to see more clearly the role played by the virtual world within my research project as will be discussed below in Section 4.5.3

Dörnyei (2007: 176) defines Classroom Research as a broad umbrella term for empirical investigations that use the classroom as the main research site. Thus, he continues (ibid.), the term “Classroom Research” concerns any study that examines how teaching and learning take place in context. Dörnyei (op. cit.) lists both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection, including Ethnography and Case Studies, within the framework of Classroom Research and the research domain of discourse analysis of classroom interaction. Additional research methods he refers to (op. cit.) within the tradition of Classroom Research are classroom observation, mixed-methods research and Action Research. An cursory overview of the main literature on Classroom Research in Applied Linguistics (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Allwright and Hanks 2009; Bailey and Nunan, 1986; Dörnyei, 2007; Ellis, 2012; Hall, 2002; McKay, 2006; Nunan, 1992; 2005; Nunan and Bailey, 2008; Richards, 2003; van Lier, 1988) reveals that it is characterised by its interest in the following areas: interaction, teachers and learners, task design and classroom discourse, all of which were also core areas within my own teaching context within the research project. Once I had accepted that what I was doing was just as much about Classroom Research as it was about researching online communication in language learning and teaching as defined by Lamy and Hampel (2007), I was led to want to question the “room” in the term “classroom research”. What does “classroom research” really mean? In his overview of Classroom Research in Applied Linguistics, Nunan (2005) also pushes us to question what is meant
by classroom research along very similar lines claiming that the notions of how we define a classroom and what is meant by research in relation to a classroom are not unproblematic. Indeed, if we go back into the Classroom Research literature listed above, we will notice that the focus is very much on what makes up the classroom: the people involved, typically the teachers and the learners, their interactions and language learning. In other words, it can be argued that, in most of the Classroom Research literature listed above, the focus tends to be on what “goes on” in the classroom rather than on the physical space of the classroom itself. While this may seem to be a blatantly obvious fact, being able to define what Classroom Research means emerged as a key understanding for me in my research project and one which was able to move me forward. Indeed, similarly to my discovery of the relevancy of Practitioner Research discussed in Section 4.3.1 above, once I was able to position my research project within the tradition of Classroom Research and not only within the tradition of online and virtual world education and other e-learning traditions, I also felt justified in being able to draw on the wealth of studies and debate into classroom interaction in particular and which had emerged as a key area of interest in relation to participation as discussed in Chapter 2. The areas of interest within the tradition of Classroom Research into interaction based on the core Classroom Research literature review above can be summarised as follows:

1) learner-learner interaction
2) teacher-learner interaction
3) classroom communities
4) learner discourse and discourse analysis

One category from the list above that requires additional discussion here as it is less self-explanatory and has not been taken up in Chapters 2 and 3 on participation is that of classroom community. Hall (2002) discusses the importance of creating a community
of learners in the classroom in relation to participation in communicative language tasks. She writes (2002: 45):

“A fairly large body of research has examined classroom life from a sociocultural perspective (e.g., Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Gutierrez, 1994; 1995; Lemke, 1988; Moll, 1990; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993). The findings of these studies make clear the consequential roles that both teachers and students play in creating their classroom communities. More specifically, they reveal how, through regular engagement in their recurring classroom activities, teachers and students develop habits of participation that define particular norms and expectations for their roles and role relationships. For example, together they define the kinds of verbal and nonverbal behaviors they consider appropriate and inappropriate for displaying attention to each other. In addition, through their jointly constructed activities, teachers and students define what counts as subject matter content and how students are to demonstrate their understandings of this knowledge.” (Hall, 2002: 45)

Based on a review of the literature, Hall (2002: 48 - 49) summarises and illustrates some of the main contextual characteristics of effective communities of learners. These communities, as presented by Hall, are characterised by an atmosphere which is conducive to both collaborative and individual work and ones where affective concerns are considered as important as intellectual and academic ones. In effective communities of learners, tasks are appropriate and promote a safe environment for academic and social risk taking yet adequately challenging and relevant so that learners may develop their critical skills and draw upon their own body of knowledge thus maximising their participation in classroom discourse. Last but not least, Hall (ibid.) points to the critical role played by teachers in establishing and maintaining effectual communities of learning. Alongside the more well-known teacher-expertise domains such as content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, she also discusses the teacher’s role in
particular in supporting learner participation. Through their routines, actions and classroom behaviour, and the type of learning environment they create, teachers have the power either to open up classroom dynamics to participation or to clamp down on it. Learners draw on these teacher-led classroom dynamics to make sense of, and participate in, their classroom events.

To conclude, my initial reflection on the nature of what I was doing led me to include within the theoretical framework of reference of this PhD input from the tradition of Classroom Research. This reflects the call made by Lamy and Hampel (2007), mentioned in Chapter 3, for CMCL research to build on existing fields of research within the broader tradition of language learning and teaching.

4.5.3 Virtual worlds as a research tool for reflexivity

As a result of the de-virtualisation of my research, I was also able to see the potential of the virtual world platform as a research tool more clearly. When compared to online platforms such as Moodle and WebCT, for example, and the video conferencing tools commonly used in synchronous online education, it is generally agreed that virtual worlds are significantly more immersive (e.g. Cheney and Sanders, 2011; Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; De Freitas et al., 2010; Jauregi et al., 2011; Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Peachev et al., 2010b; Schweinhorst, 2009). Indeed, it can be argued that the power of virtual world platforms such as Second Life is to be found in their highly developed representational and iconic dimension (cf. Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; De Freitas et al., 2010; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010). But how does all of this impact on our educational use of them? There were two questions that came to my mind in relation to my own research project. 1) Had I been using another type of platform, would I have been able to see what I was doing as “Classroom Research”? And 2) What was it about the platform that triggered this specific realisation? Was it the process of data collection
which was comparable to the processes involved in Classroom Research or was it the visual representation of the virtual world Island of Talkademy with its classroom like settings\textsuperscript{16} and realistic simulations of f2f interaction that had influenced my thinking and shaped my understanding of what I was doing? Had I been using another area of Second Life such as an enchanted forest area or a nightclub, would I still have been able to see what I saw? Or was it the fact that the Talkademy island was NOT that similar after all to a traditional classroom that had influenced my initial confusion about what I was doing? The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, they have been included here to explain my reflexivity as triggered by the specific tool I was using in my research as an illustration of the potential of virtual worlds for reflective practice in general.

4.5.4 EP and the Talkademy Business English Course

The framing of my research project as a case study, and the inclusion of additional contextual data as a result of this, enabled me to fully appreciate the extent to which it made sense to discuss my research project in terms of EP. In particular, the adoption of EP as an additional and complementary methodological approach to the case study enabled me to map more clearly the contributions of all participants in the project as will be discussed in Chapter 5 and to reinforce the collective and participatory nature of my research project. In addition to this, the call of EP to attend to the “quality of life of all involved” and to “look downwards” can also be seen as having contributed to the inclusion of contextual information which might have otherwise gone unnoticed or untapped and can thus be viewed as contributing to the thoroughness of my account and the building of the case study as well.

\textsuperscript{16} A description of the various environments will be provided in the Case Study chapter. The extent to which the settings were “classroom like” can be debated. However, the term is used here simply to refer to the impact of the environment in general.
4.6 Limitations of the research design

All research carries with it a set of limitations (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2009) and I have aimed in this chapter to discuss some of the limitations of the qualitative and exploratory case-study research traditions in particular. As far as my specific research design is concerned, the main risk was that the looseness of the exploratory approach, combined with the centrality of my role and beliefs as a qualitative researcher researching my own context, would ultimately come to bear on the strength of the claims my research project was able to make. In view of the fluid nature of my research design, I, thus, attempted to be meticulous in putting in place a series of countermeasures. These have included the use of a Research Protocol as illustrated in Section 4.2.2 above, Reflexivity as discussed in particular in Section 4.3 and throughout this chapter in general, and, last but not least, Triangulation as discussed at some length in Section 4.4.11. As one of the triangulation strategies of this research project, thickness of description has been deployed, in particular, in the interest of both trustworthiness of the account and research validity and is documented in Chapter 5 to follow.

Finally, the extent to which other teachers and researchers working in similar contexts will be able to relate to my research claims as they are developed in Chapter 7, will ultimately be, I believe, the measure against which my research can be fully evaluated. Furthermore, I have made every attempt in my analysis of my data in Chapter 7 to relate my claims to the existing literature as it is reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 as part of an ongoing process of theory building in qualitative research as discussed in Section 4.4.7 above.

4.7 Conclusions

The overarching approach of Reflexivity together with the Research Protocol as described in this chapter provided me with the framework for the implementation of my
research project as will be described in the following chapters. On the one hand I was aware that there were certain steps that I had to go through in order to carry out my research project, yet, on the other, I felt the need, as a researcher, to constantly question what I was doing. Indeed, the loose methodological framework, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, has its justification and rationale in the fact that, while recognising that all research carries with it bias of some sort from the framing of a research question to the theoretical field to which we claim to belong, I wanted to uncover some of my thinking about methodology before the methodology restricted my thinking. An additional advantage of engaging with Reflexivity from the outset of the project was the fact that I was able to capture some of my bias before analysing and discussing the data. Data about the reflexive process stems from both the case study data and from my three-year engagement with reflection around the project. Reflexivity is discussed in this research project both as a methodology, a method for data generation and as a tool for data analysis. The main outcome from Reflexivity as discussed in this chapter was that, essentially, I was not doing what I thought I was doing. I thought I was researching learner participation in virtual worlds. I was actually researching learner participation within my classroom practice as it played out in a virtual world.

In addition, it was through the employment of general reflexive approach that I was able to view the broader context in which the phenomenon of participation was embedded and realised the need to look at it as a whole within the tradition of Case Study research. In turn, the case study was also able to capture and organise my Reflexivity for inclusion within my analytical whole thus contributing to reinforcing the link between the two methods. Finally, EP provided me with an additional thinking framework and acted as a checklist against which I could make greater sense of what I was doing as a practitioner. It is interesting to see how so much of what I was doing intuitively was actually very much in line with the approach to Practitioner Research as advocated by
EP. It is perhaps no coincidence that I decided to embrace EP in the first place. Indeed, as discussed in the qualitative research literature, the methodological approach we choose to use in our research is a clear reflection of our epistemology or our understandings about how knowledge is created (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Creswell 2009; Mason, 2002). In a way, one could argue that methodological choice can be seen as the balance between a suitable framework for the research project at hand and the researcher’s beliefs about how knowledge can be accessed.

Last but not least, it has been rather paradoxical, as a researcher, to try and trace the development of an understanding that I did not yet possess and that was “emergent.” Now I know what some of my outcomes were in terms of reflexivity, I have been able to trace back their development. There is a devoted section in my data collection and organisation table (Table 6.3) in Chapter 6 which documents and maps reflexivity both in terms of my development in thinking at different stages of the research project and as researcher bias. Thus, it is intended that this chapter be read just as much as a documentation of “critical research moments” as an account of research procedures.

Chapter 5 will discuss in detail the Case Study as the basis of my methodological approach described in this chapter. Chapter 6 on data collection and classification will provide an in-depth account of the data collection process and its intimate connection with data classification leading to a first level of analysis.
Chapter 5 The Talkademy Business English Course

“Our deepest human understandings can be lived, even if they cannot be described.” (Allwright, 2005: 359)

5.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed account of the online Business English course at the heart of the case study of this research project. The first part of the chapter provides background information about how the course came about and the rationale for its adoption. The second part provides an overview of the course. The third section discusses the context of the joint collaboration between the educational charity Talkademy, the University of Bielefeld and the University of Hull in the running of the course. The fourth part of the chapter looks at the design of the course within the Research and Development (R&D) mandate I received from Talkademy. The fifth section provides an in-depth description of the implementation of the course and includes my reflections as a teacher. The final section summarises the relationship between Exploratory Practice approach discussed in the previous chapter and my case study.

5.1 Adoption of the Talkademy Business English Course

As mentioned in my discussion of the Research Protocol in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.3, from the outset of my research project I had in mind the type of course that was needed to support me in achieving my research aim of “exploring” language learner participation in virtual worlds. It was clear to me that I needed either to identify or create a course that was, on the one hand, loosely structured to allow for issues related to participation to emerge yet, at the same time, relevant to students in order to
guarantee appeal and attendance. To this end, I had initially considered the option of setting up and running a course myself for several reasons. In the first instance, language courses delivered in virtual worlds by qualified teachers at the outset of my research project still constituted a niche in terms of the numbers of courses available for observation and the number of students in attendance. Because of this, many of the language courses being run were frequently over-researched in the sense that there was often a very low researcher-student ratio within the courses. For example, it had often been the case in some of the experimental courses that I had been involved in that the number of students was equal to the number of teachers and researchers. This, I felt, could be detrimental to my research by making the online learning event in a virtual world feel even more “strange” and unnatural than it already might be perceived to be by participants thus compounding the observer’s paradox effect. It had, in fact, been my experience that the type of course I was aiming to observe would generally enlist students with no prior experience of virtual world platforms and for whom the environment would be totally unfamiliar. Last but not least, the fact that for research purposes my avatar would have to be present and visible and follow the students around contributed, I felt, to making the whole experience even more artificial.

In addition to the above, I also had ethical concerns about accessing courses run by others. As a researcher, I was aware of the experimental nature of most of the courses that were taking place at the time and I did not want to be taking away a research opportunity from colleagues who were running their own courses. In addition to this, I was also confronted with the need to identify a course which I felt would be compatible with my specific research aims and yield the greatest results in terms of relevant data generation. The courses I had been involved with indirectly in the past were often highly structured and provided, I felt at the time, little scope for “exploration” and “understanding” as advocated by the EP approach discussed in Chapter 4. In brief, there
were actually not many options available to me for observation in my working languages (English, Italian, Spanish) and that met the criteria I had deemed necessary for my research.

Fortunately and fortuitously, just the course I was looking for came to me through an invitation from colleagues in Austria. In the summer of 2011 I was contacted via email by the educational charity, Talkademy, to see whether I would be interested in helping them run and design a pilot Business English course for the Language Centre at the University of Bielefeld in Germany. I jumped at the offer for several reasons. Firstly, the course in itself was of interest to me as a researcher independently of any role as a co-designer and teacher. It was a course that was being initiated in response to specific Research and Development (R&D) and teaching needs of two educational institutions (Talkademy and the Language Centre at Bielefeld University). As a naturally occurring event it fitted in nicely with my specific case study approach as described in Chapter 4.

In addition to this, the course would enable me to resolve the ethical and procedural concerns mentioned above and which were causing me much hesitation in identifying a suitable course for my study. However, the decision to take on the additional role of lead teacher and co-designer was not as straightforward.

As someone with experience of virtual world course design and teaching in pilot studies, I was well aware of the amount of work involved and of the fact that the taking on the role of teacher and developer could end up being an additional workload on top of my existing research commitments. And, while some financial compensation was indeed offered to me at the time, I knew well that money had very little to do with my decision. However, I also realised that I was being given the opportunity not only to participate in what I had defined as a “real” course but also that I was being given the chance as a teacher and co-designer to shape the course in such a way that, while responding to and prioritising the teaching and learning needs of those institutions I
would be working for, would also allow me to create a framework which could also take into consideration my research perspective described in Chapter 4.

5.1.1 A history of professional collaboration and shared visions

In addition to the above considerations, the fact that the invitation had come directly from Talkademy made me inclined to accept the proposal for several reasons. I had worked closely with their R&D team in the EU funded project Avalon from 2008 to 2010. My previous experience of design and course development with Talkademy made me certain I would receive a considerable amount of teaching and practical support from them in the implementation of the joint project. The entire burden of running and designing the course would be shared thus making the venture more realistic and manageable from a research perspective. In addition to this, our shared experience also meant that I felt comfortable working with them in an open and collegial manner knowing that we respected each other enough to be able to express our disagreement or divergence of opinions in a way that could take our research forward. Furthermore, I had already taught for Talkademy on a similar course run by them and was convinced that a lot could be gained professionally by another round of cooperation. In particular, I perceived that their specific background in educational development, and in management of educational development, was a valuable added dimension to have within my research project as it potentially allowed for the development of a broader understanding and contextualisation of my own research project. Most importantly, however, the course designers at Talkademy and I also shared a vision of where we wanted to go, making the prospect of working together not only easy but also inspirational and challenging. In short, I felt that Talkademy, if anyone, were the right partner for me and my research project on a number of levels. Last but not least, from informal discussions with Talkademy over the years, I was also aware of their specific interest in developing and working around the issue of
“participation” specifically. It was clear to me at the time that, while we might be working with different conceptualisations of participation, our shared research focus would nevertheless enable us to make use of the course as a context in which the concept could be profitably explored. In this sense, I viewed the joint design process as a way in which we could make our tacit understandings about participation explicit as advocated in the EP approach to research discussed in Chapter 4.

5.1.2 Creation of an Exploratory Practice learning partnership

By accepting a full participatory status as teacher and co-designer (in addition to my role as a researcher) I was also able to put fully into practice the tenets of EP as discussed in Chapter 4. As a teacher and co-designer, I would be able to research my own teaching context from the inside and as a member of a learning partnership which included fellow co-designers and teaching support staff as well as the students. Indeed, the students were explicitly invited to take part in learning about the virtual world environment as a medium for language learning. This is emphasised in the course description provided on the website of the Language Centre of University of Bielefeld which makes explicit the following:

“The last class will be a discussion on what we have learned and an evaluation of the pedagogical medium, along with a presentation of what you have produced in the virtual world.” (University of Bielefeld, 2014a: para. 3)

The use of the phrase “what we” have learned” can be read as an indication that both the institution, the teachers and the learners were viewed as part of the same “learning process” by the teaching staff of the Language Centre at Bielefeld who were responsible for the pilot course. As such, the statement above can be read as a general reflection of

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1 My italics.
their approach to the joint project. The learning angle around the medium was also explained to students in individual and group conversations prior to course commencement and during the introductory classes. It was also regularly repeated throughout the course and is reflected in the learning partnership “Round Table” which was held in the last session and where we discussed, as a group made up of teachers, designers, support staff and students, the students’ impressions of the course. In short, the context in which the *Talkademy Business English Course* played out was a learning process for all involved at various levels: for me, as a teacher, it was an opportunity for Reflective Practice and professional development, for Talkademy it amounted to an activity which fed directly into their ongoing process of R&D and, for the University of Bielefeld, the course as a Pilot Study was part of their ongoing process of institutional course evaluation and development. For the students it was a language course they had opted for as part of their own individual learning pathway and which awarded them HE credits towards their degree courses. A more detailed description of how the course fitted into the different research processes of all members of the learning partnership will be provided in Section 5.3 below which describes the specific research aims of the three project partners (Talkademy, the University of Bielefeld and the University of Hull). In addition to the above, during the negotiation phase between myself and Talkademy, one of the conditions I put on the table was that I would be able to use the course and the design process as part of my PhD research at Hull University. Not only was this seen as acceptable to both Talkademy and the University of Bielefeld, but it was actually viewed as providing added value to their R&D processes. Having a researcher, as well as an experienced virtual world teacher - and someone with whom they shared a similar commitment to education -, participate in their course was in line with their own understandings of open and challenging R&D processes. In short, as a development team, we were able to bring together the development and research needs
of all 4 key partner groupings or stakeholders (the teachers, the developers, the educational providers and the students) in such a way that the development for one partner also fed into the processes of development or research of the other partners involved in the project. Furthermore, and as will be discussed in greater detail in the following section, as part of the design process we also strove to reach out to the broader virtual world educational community on the assumption that the understandings and processes we were working with could benefit and be further challenged by placing the course within a broader context.

5.1.3 The virtual world educational community

During the design process of the course, we decided to bring in colleagues and fellow developers who were working within the larger virtual world educational community in the interest of the development of the course. Attempts were also made to bring in students from other courses running at the time in Second Life. This idea, however, had to be abandoned for practical reasons (it was hard to get student schedules to coincide without planning months in advance). The idea of there being a larger community of learners and practitioners “learning about learning” in virtual worlds which it was meaningful to be tapping in to was, nevertheless, a recurring theme of the design and the implementation of the course and reflected the general purpose of the Euroversity project described in Chapter 1.

5.1.4 Members of the learning partnership

The learning partnership introduced in Section 5.1.2 above was made up by the following members: myself as the researcher, two teachers including myself, three developers including myself, support staff, staff in training, the learners and fellow teachers and developers from the virtual world educational community. The members of the learning partnership are listed here below. Members’ roles are described and the respective learning objectives for that role are listed accordingly. Throughout the rest of
this chapter, in the following chapters and in the presentation of the data, I will refer to some of the members of the learning partnership by using the initials of their non virtual-world names and to others by using their avatar name initials from Second Life. In general, I will refer to those individuals with whom I already had a working relationship (i.e. my co-developers from Talkademy) with the initials of their non-virtual world names and to the students and some of the support staff with their avatar names. This reflects my general way of thinking about the individuals involved and it usually reflects where I have gotten to know the person. For example, I have the tendency to refer to people I have met for the first time in the virtual world of Second Life by their avatar name. This method was the one I found most effective in dealing with the data as it was easier for me to associate events and data to the names they were originally linked to in my mind. However, the relationship between individuals and the way I tend to refer to them is not the focus of this study and is mentioned here only as a way of justifying the approach I have used. When dealing with the data connected to students, abbreviations of student avatar names have been used within the text of this dissertation as a way of making the learner avatars anonymous. Additional ethical issues surrounding the data will be dealt with in Section 5.3.3 below and in Chapter 6.

**Researcher:**

- Luisa Panichi (LP) (Second Life name, Jole Zhong), Hull University, researcher, learning about participation and about researching participation. My different roles in the course and within the research project will be discussed further below in Section 5.3.3.

**Teachers:**

- LP, Hull University, lead teacher; learning about participation;
- Donovan Babin (DB), Bielefeld University, teacher and student assessor upon completion of the course, learning about implementing a Second Life course in
their university context. DB did not appear in the virtual world during the course but observed the lessons from the Language Lab at the Language Centre of his institution as an outside observer. He took part as lead teacher in the final lesson which was held in the Language Lab at the Language Centre at Bielefeld University. DB also observed the in-world interaction over extended periods through the tutor avatar (VickNZ introduced below) using a secondary headset.

**Developers:**

- LP, Hull University, main co-developer with Klaus Hammermüller from Talkademy, learning about participation;
- Klaus Hammermüller (KH) (Second Life name, Claudio Whalen), Talkademy, main co-developer with LP, Hull University, learning about education in virtual worlds;
- Gerhilde Messl-Egghart (GM-E) (Second Life name, Yvonne Handrick), Talkademy, co-developer, learning about education in virtual worlds.

**Support staff:**

- KH, Talkademy, learning about language teaching and learning in virtual worlds;
- GM-E, Talkademy, learning about language teaching and learning in virtual worlds;
- Konnyko (Second Life name), Talkademy, learning about language teaching and learning in virtual worlds, participated as a student in the course;
- DB, Bielefeld University, learning about language teaching and learning in virtual worlds;
- WickiNZ, (Second Life name), tutor for Bielefeld University, learning about language teaching and learning in virtual worlds.
Students

Seven students enrolled and took part in the Business English course run by the University of Bielefeld. They are represented by the following avatars in the data. The avatar names have been abbreviated so that they are not recognisable. The list is in alphabetical order:

- BB
- FX
- HTE
- NA
- OCH
- TZ
- VA

Virtual world community members:

The following three people from our broader virtual world educational community network took part in some of the tasks from the Talkademy Business English Course:

- David Richardson (DR), (Second Life name, David Rinkitink), Linneaus University, Sweden, virtual world teacher of English and partner in the Euroversity Network;
- Kip Yellowjacket (Second Life name), virtual world teacher and educational developer associated with the virtual world language educational space Virtlantis in Second Life; ²
- Eduardo Valencia, (EV) (Second Life name, Eduardo Gans), entrepreneur in the field of new media and education including virtual worlds.³

² For more information about Virtlantis, see the Virtantis website at www.virtlantis.com.
³ More information about Eduardo Valencia’s work can be found on his blog at eduardovalencia.com.
5.1.5 Summary of the rationale for case selection

This section summarises the main reasons why, as a researcher, I decided to use the English Business course run by Talkademy for Bielefeld University as the kernel of my case study.

1) The course was “pre-existent” in the sense that it would be running with or without me and, as such, was to a certain extent “independent” of my specific research framework and my intervention. The course was a response to a real need or, in other words, to a need that was outside the needs of my research framework. As such, the course was a natural occurrence of the event I was aiming to research and met the Case Study research requirements for this research project as discussed in Chapter 4.

2) I would be receiving support with implementation making it more manageable for me in my triple role of teacher, design team member and sole researcher.

3) The developers and I had worked together before and as such there was a reasonable expectation that we would be able to work together successfully again.

4) The developers’ approach was in line with my research aims; their course idea was compatible with my research needs. The developers and I shared an understanding of what we wanted to achieve.

5) The developers and I also had sufficiently different backgrounds and conceptualisations of participation in language education to ensure that the research project had room for development.

6) The course design would benefit from collaboration with a broad community thus increasing the chances of incorporating new ideas and understandings in our individual development and research processes.
7) The course represented a snapshot of where we were at the time in terms of our thinking about virtual worlds in education and acted as a point of reference for further development beyond the project itself. In this sense the course itself is a document of expert understandings at a specific time.

8) The course development was working in the direction of what we had envisioned the Euroversity Network would do as discussed in Chapter 1. As such, the course fitted into our long term development aims. In this sense, the course also acted as a building block for future development.

5.2 Course description

The Talkademy Business English Course was a 4 month language course offered at the B1+ level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It ran from 27th October 2011 through to 2nd February 2012. I refer to the course as the “Talkademy” Business Course as it was initially conceived of and subsequently modified and adapted to new contexts over time by Talkademy. Talkademy was contracted to deliver the course for the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld and I was brought in by Talkademy to teach the course to students enrolled at Bielefeld. The course was made up of a total of 10 lessons. The first nine lessons were conducted online in the virtual world of Second Life. The tenth and final lesson took place f2f in the Language Lab of the University of Bielefeld. The first 9 lessons took place on the educational island of Forum Europe in Second Life which was designed, owned and hosted by Talkademy. The lessons were held on a weekly basis and lasted approximately 90 minutes each. There were a total of 5 staff members (in addition to myself as the lead teacher and researcher) involved at different times and ways in the

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4 The full title is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. The full Framework text in English can be found at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf.

5 The island can be found by placing the following slurl (Second Life url) in an Internet search engine: http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/ForumEurope/128/128/0. A shorter address for the same location is http://goo.gl/LFwX6c. To enter Second Life, one needs to download and install the programme first.
project and 7 students. The course was completed by two of the students and partially completed by 1. All of the students were enrolled at Bielefeld University and were recruited via the Language Centre of the University. For the final session which took place in the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld in a f2f context, myself as the virtual world teacher and support staff based outside of Bielefeld were brought into the Language Lab via Skype and participated in the final lesson via video-conferencing.

All students were aware that by enrolling in the virtual world Business English course they were participating in a pilot course run by the University of Bielefeld. The virtual world Business English course was offered to the students as an option among a selection of courses offered by the Language Centre at Bielefeld University. The students were informed about the virtual world option at the same time that they received information about other f2f courses being offered. The three participating institutions had different interests in the course and played different roles in the research project which will be described in detail in Section 5.3 below.

Course aims

The aims of the Talkademy Business English Course were to provide students with activities and learning events that would enable them to present a Business Plan in English upon completion of the course. Initially the course was framed as a competition between two or more teams of students who would work together to produce and present a Business Plan for their team with each team member working on a specific area of the Business Plan. However, this initial framework was remodelled during the course as not all students were able to attend the course for the entire duration making the distribution of tasks across team members problematic. The final lesson saw students individually present the Business Plans that they had worked on with their team members during the course.

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6 See the dedicated page on the Language Centre’s website at www.uni-bielefeld.de/fachsprachenzentrum/e-learning/2ndLife.html for a description of the course.
Course syllabus

The syllabus was initially based on the syllabi of previously run courses and was changed to reflect the focus of the design team and the teaching conditions of the course. As designers and teachers we started out with a general framework of the course and created activities and course content in parallel to the course implementation so as to be able to respond in a timely fashion to the learning and teaching context as it developed. The 10 lessons listed here below were preceded by two compulsory introductory sessions where the support teaching staff made sure that students were able to access the environment from their preferred access location (for example, from home, or from the Language Lab at the Language Centre at Bielefeld University) and that they were able to use the basic communication functions of voice chat, text chat, IM (instant messaging), teleporting and movement in the environment. The syllabus will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.5 below on Course Implementation.

Lesson 1/Getting to Know You.

- This lesson focussed on getting to know the student group, explaining the course and the research project and an initial discussion around the environment as an educational medium.

Lesson 2/Presenting a Business Plan (this lesson is also referred to in the lesson notes as “The subway hat presentation”).

- In this lesson the students received a taster of what it means to present a business plan to investors based on an existing presentation used in previous iterations of the course called The Subway Hat presentation.

Lesson 3/Business Plan Ideas.

- Students presented their initial business plan ideas and decided what teams they want to join.

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7 To teleport is a term used in Second Life to mean travelling or moving to a specific location within the platform. This function is activated by selecting the teleport function available in different menus within the platform.
Lesson 4/Developing the Business Plan

• Students started to develop their business plan in their teams. Both content and language input was provided in support of this activity.

Lesson 5/Making Your Pitch

• Students presented the first outline of their business plan to two guests acting as investors following the marketing format of the “elevator pitch” exercise used in previous iterations of the course. The guests were two members of our extended network, EV and DR listed above in Section 5.1.4.

Lesson 6/Consolidation

• Students played several different games which focus both on business plan format and content and on presentation and communication language and strategies.

Lesson 7/Writing the Business Plan

• Students worked in their teams on the writing of their business plans.

Lesson 8/Meet Your Customer

• In this session the students presented their plan to the other students who acted as potential customers/clients and to a guest acting as customer. The guest was Kip Yellowjacket, introduced above in Section 5.1.4.

Lesson 9/Final Rehearsal

• Students presented their business plan, answered questions and received general feedback in preparation for the final f2f presentation in Lesson 10.

Lesson 10 Business Plan Presentations

• Students presented their business plans f2f and received comments from the teachers and students. General group reflection took place on individual and course achievements and on the experience of learning in a virtual world.
5.2.1 Teaching and support roles

Teachers
There were two teachers involved in the course: myself as the online teacher both in Second Life and via Skype in the final session and DB from Bielefeld who only played an active role in the final session and was responsible for final assessment and the awarding of credits to students. DB did not come into the virtual world during the course and was able to observe student activity as it took place in the lab in Bielefeld.

Support staff
There were a total of 3 members of support staff working on the course continuously. KH and GM-E from Talkademy as a technical support staff online and WickiNZ, introduced in Section 5.1.4 above, who was acting as Bielefeld support staff member. WickiNZ was both in the lab in Bielefeld and online in Second life as her avatar. The roles of the technical support staff included making sure students could access the platform at all times and that their communication channels, in particular voice-chat, were functioning. Support staff also made sure that students knew where they had to be and would go and collect them from other locations in Second Life when necessary. KH was also responsible for changing the environment according to the learning events we were running and for the rezzing\(^8\) of learning objects that were needed for the learning scenarios in each lesson. An additional staff member from Talkademy, Konnyko, introduced in Section 5.1.4 above, participated as a student in some of the lessons so as to gain an understanding of learning and teaching in virtual worlds as part of the knowledge she required for her position at the time as marketing support with Talkademy.

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\(^8\) To rez an object in Second Life means to make it appear by taking it out of a previously created inventory. This process usually takes place in real time and it used by teachers to change the setting or scene for an activity during a lesson, for example.
5.2.2 Assessment of students

Students were assessed and provided with feedback about the status of their language development, presentation and Business English skills throughout the course by me as their lead teacher in the virtual world platform (formative assessment). The final lesson (Lesson 10) consisted of a 5-minute powerpoint oral presentation followed by a 5-minute Question and Answer session in front of the class and the course teaching and support staff. The final lesson took place in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld and not in the virtual world inline with the course requirements specified by the University of Bielefeld. The final lesson will be discussed in further detail below in Section 5.5. Students were assessed and deemed to have passed the course based on their end of course presentation in Lesson 10. Students were awarded 7.5 HE credits for successful completion of the course. Final assessment and the awarding of credits (summative assessment) was carried out by DB as the lead teacher at the University of Bielefeld.

5.2.3 Course location and access

The first nine lessons of the course took place on the Talkademy educational island of Forum Europe in Second Life listed above in Section 5.2. Students accessed the 3D environment via the Language Lab at the Language Centre at Bielefeld. As far as my own access was concerned to the course in general, I participated via the virtual world for the first nine lessons and via Skype for the final lesson from a combination of computers and private and work places of access (home and private office) in Italy. Talkademy support staff were based in Austria and accessed the course via the virtual world for the first nine lessons and via Skype for the final lesson.

The social networking site Facebook was used as the online course management platform for community asynchronous communication and for instant messaging when students had trouble accessing the virtual world platform. The rationale for using
Facebook was based on the consideration that course members needed a place for asynchronous communication and a place where homework could be assigned and delivered and links for further reading could be posted. Some of these functions could have been carried out in the virtual world in conjunction with the use of email, for example. Information could have been sent to students via Second Life Notecards\(^9\) as well but this would have meant, however, that the information would have remained piecemeal to a certain extent and would not have been visualised as a whole. Facebook allowed for all communication to appear together in both a chronological and cohesive fashion. In particular, however, Facebook was chosen as a result of a preliminary investigation by Talkademy that revealed that all of the students were already using it. In addition to this, Talkademy was already using Facebook as an online platform for some of the other courses they were involved in and they were familiar with the set-up and had found it to be a useful support tool. As such, it was a natural choice for the course.\(^10\)

5.2.4 Second Life

Nine out of the 10 lessons took place on the educational island of Talkademy in the virtual world of Second Life. Second Life was chosen as the preferred virtual world platform by Talkademy for a number of reasons. In particular it provided them with sophisticated building tools, relative environment stability and was an open environment making it possible for learners to explore locations other than Talkademy as language resources for their learning. The main communication tools used by the course participants during the course were the in-built tools of voice-chat, text-chat, IM (Instant Messaging) and snapshots (a tool to take snapshots of the environment one’s

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\(^9\) Notecards are a Second Life tool used for the sending of textual information that is too long for IM.

\(^10\) There has been some debate in the public arena for some time (e.g. Hoare, 2007) about whether social networking sites are students’ preferred choice for communication about learning with their educational providers. However, the decision to use Facebook for our course was made by Talkademy prior to my involvement. A discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this design decision go beyond the scope of this research project.
avatar is in). Notecards were used occasionally to gather feedback from students as part of Talkademy’s evaluation process but not used for the delivery of course content.

5.3 The context

This section will take a look at the three partner organisations involved in this project both in terms of their contribution to the course and the role played by the course within the three distinct organisational contexts.

5.3.1 Talkademy

Talkademy is part of the non-profit educational organization Verein Offenes Lernen (Open Learning Association), based in Vienna, Austria. According to its mission statement, it aims to serve learners in a way that is appropriate for today's living and working environments and to become a prototype of a truly 21st century learning organization (Talkademy, n.d.a). The founding members of Talkademy have been involved in educational work and projects in virtual worlds both in the field of adult and school education since 2008. Talkademy has been involved as partner in current and completed EU funded educational projects which look at the use of virtual worlds and ICT in education such as AVALON, Talk with me, Euroversity and Next-Tell.11

The Business English course

Talkademy’s interest in this specific course development project lies in its ongoing professional need to carry out R&D in the field in which it operates and in particular in the delivery of online language courses which use virtual worlds as their main educational platform. The Business English course was initially created in 2009 and has been constantly reviewed since then. The course was also run under the Avalon project. A description of how the Business English course was implemented can be found under the Avalon courses on the Avalon website.12

The Talkademy island in Second Life

One of the major contributions of Talkademy to the course was the creation and design of the space in which the course took place. The Talkademy island is searchable in Second Life with the name of Forum Europe and was first designed in 2008 by the Talkademy R&D team. The space is left as empty as possible to allow designers and members of educational groups to build and to rez objects and holodecks in the space and to move around freely. Talkademy are the owners of the 3D space used for this course which means that they control and administer access to the island at all times. As far as Talkademy is concerned, this means that the space remains open for educational purposes (visitors can come and go and join in activities upon request) but that unwanted visitors are kept away. As far as the builds are concerned, Talkademy, while remaining the owner of all 3D objects, nevertheless encourages use of their space for educational purposes by other interested parties.

Staff and their roles

Talkademy participated in the case study with two key members of staff as mentioned above in Section 5.1.4 on the Learning Partnership. Klaus Hammermüller (KH) played a major role with me in the design process and was my key collaborator for the entire project. Gerhilde Messel-Egghart (GM-E) participated in the design process to a lesser extent and provided technical support to learners throughout the course.

13 A holodeck is a space like a stage or environment which can be placed and removed from the 3D environment according to what the environment is being used for at a certain time. Teachers often have an inventory of different holodecks for use for creating different settings for specific teaching aims such as shops, offices, hotel receptions, etc.
14 In general when working with newcomers to virtual worlds it is considered good practice to leave the welcome areas or meeting places as open and empty as possible so as to allow for newbies (avatars of users who have no or limited experience of virtual world platforms) to become familiar with the movement features of the environment.
15 A build is a 3D object which has been designed or “built” and added to the virtual world platform by a user or Second Life resident.
16 An example of this is the name of Forum Europe for the Talkademy island and by which it is searchable in Second Life. Indeed, the Island changed its name to Forum Europe as part of collaboration with another EU funded project which was looking at virtual worlds in language education, Niflar. Niflar was coordinated by the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. Niflar also feeds into the Euroversity Network.
5.3.2 The University of Bielefeld

The University of Bielefeld is a medium size German university founded in 1969. It has a total of approximately 21,500 students enrolled in 13 faculties in 105 degree courses across the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and technology. Nearly all of its teaching is delivered f2f while offering some e-learning solutions mostly as additional services or pilot studies (University of Bielefeld, 2014e).

The Language Centre (Fachsprachenzentrum)

The Language Centre at the University of Bielefeld offers free, non-compulsory language training to all university students from all subject areas and at all levels of study and to university staff. The aim of the centre is to provide the university population with the language skills they need for their professional and personal development (University of Bielefeld, 2014d) The Language Centre currently provides instruction in 15 languages (University of Bielefeld, 2014c). Most language learning and teaching is carried out f2f while a few e-learning options are offered.

Motivation and attendance

The fact that the courses are not mandatory and free of charge can be said to impact on course attendance in different ways. On the one hand, it is often the case that the Language Centre attracts students who are highly motivated and wish to take on additional courses as part of their broader professional development. On the other hand, students who enrol in courses often do not complete the courses and there is a certain amount of dropout. In addition to this, there is a tendency of students to drop in and out of courses according to their other study commitments and sometimes attendance is limited to the first and final sessions of courses. This pattern in student behaviour tends to be quite common at tertiary level in Germany and certainly reflects the trend I have experienced in my 20 years of teaching at the Language Centre of the University of Pisa, Italy, as well, where access to courses is based on a very similar set-up.
The Language Lab

The Language Laboratory at the Language Centre at Bielefeld was initially set up as part of the Language Centre’s aim to make e-learning and self-access learning more readily available to their student body (D. Babin 2012, pers. comm. 28th March). The most recent version of the Second Life programme was installed on the computer in the lab prior to course commencement and the computers had been recently upgraded following hic-cups with the running of Second Life during a previous course. Constant lab assistance is guaranteed to users in the lab and was available throughout the running of our course.

The Second Life course

The course at the centre of this case study is described specifically by the Language Centre as an e-learning opportunity alongside other e-learning choices such as video-conferencing Tandems using Skype, autonomous and self-access learning to digital resources and distance online learning set-ups which make use of e-learning platforms such as Adobe (University of Bielefeld, 2014b). The course is presented specifically as a Second Life course (University of Bielefeld, 2014a) and highlights the possibility of attending the course remotely from anywhere, for example, from home. The course is described as offering simulation for challenges in real-life working environments such as job interviews, team building activities and the putting together of Business Plans. The course is advertised as a Second Life course run by Bielefeld’s partner organisation, Talkademy. It needs to be noted here that, while the course was offered to students at Bielefeld, the running of the course and the assignment of teachers to the course took place through Talkademy who were subcontracted by the University of Bielefeld. Indeed, at the time in which the pilot course was carried out, Bielefeld University did not have any teachers who felt they had the necessary virtual world expertise to take charge of the course. In this sense, the pilot course was also a way for
Bielefeld staff to observe the processes involved in teaching in virtual worlds and was part of their own professional development processes.

The course is designed mainly for students who either have a background in Business, Management or Economics. It is also described, however, as being suitable for anyone interested in improving their English for project and team work scenarios (i.e. project management, collaborative research, marketing, etc.). The aim of the course is to help students gain confidence in various types of professional conversations in English and to help students improve their performance and confidence when giving talks and presentations in English.

Introductory classes to set up students in the virtual world were provided. Course attendance was mandatory for the introductory lessons and the final session. Computers were available to students who prefer to access the course on campus. The final session involved a discussion on what had been learnt and an evaluation of the pedagogical medium, along with a presentation of what students have produced in the virtual world.

**Learner recruitment and enrolment**

Learners who were interested in the course contacted the Language Lab staff at Bielefeld and signalled their interest. They were given more information about the experimental nature of the course. It was explained to students how the course was being run not only as an additional service to students but also as a way for the Language Centre to be able to evaluate the extent to which the platform could deliver a course of equal educational quality as the f2f courses and as a way of exploring the potential of the medium in general. Students who enrolled in the course went through the normal enrolment procedures for students attending the f2f courses at the Language Centre.
Pilot course ethics

As discussed above in Section 5.1.2 on the Learning Partnership, all students were made aware of the “developmental” nature of the Second Life course and of the fact that it was indeed a “pilot” course. The experimental nature of the course was a constant theme and was included in the final lesson not only as a reflection on the medium but as a reflection on the medium in relation to the individual student’s learning experience. The students were also made aware from the beginning of the course that the course was also part of a larger research project into learner participation both as a PhD project at the University of Hull and as part of the EU funded network Euroversity. In particular it was pointed out to students in a number of conversations during the running of the course that the focus of the research was not their language learning as such but *learning about the medium of Second Life for language learning.*

The learners

There were a total of 7 students from the University of Bielefeld who expressed an interest and enrolled in the course. Of these, 2 completed the course successfully (one male and one female student) by attending the compulsory final session and presenting their work. Another student completed the course by attending the 9th lesson and presenting her work but did not collect credits as she did not attend the final lesson. As discussed in the section above on the attendance patterns of students, the students followed similar patterns of intermittent attendance as is considered normal in f2f classes at the Language Centre at Bielefeld but with a slightly higher drop-out half-way through. However, students provided clear indication of why they had left the course and all of these reasons were related to their personal life (e.g. leaving the University of Bielefeld for some of the international students; other compulsory study commitments for the students based more permanently in Bielefeld). The student group was made up

17 My Italics.
of 4 female and 3 male students in their 20’s. The students were a combination of Erasmus exchange students studying at the University of Bielefeld as part of the exchange programme and students enrolled at the University of Bielefeld. There was one Spanish Erasmus student, one French Erasmus student, one student from a non-European background, 4 German students. The students came from a variety of disciplines including Bioscience, Business and Economics, Teacher Education, Literature studies. The make up of the student group reflected the typical make-up of the f2f language course run by the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld.

5.3.3 The University of Hull

The research project of this case study was run through the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Hull which in 2013 merged with other departments to become the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures. The Department was part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and catered for over 1000 students per year (undergraduate and postgraduate, UK/EU and international). Apart from providing a range of Bachelor and Master programmes, it was also active in research in a variety of fields from language and translation studies; gender, sexuality and society; film and visual cultures; to online learning communities, online speech communities, language in social media; second language acquisition, corpus linguistics and international communication. The Department has been a partner in a number of national projects and was involved at the time in the EU co-funded project Joyn 2.0 which was looking at the role of social networking sites in language education. The School is also coordinator of the EU co-funded network Euroversity which has been discussed above in Section 5.1.4 and in Chapter 1.

18 http://www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/modern_languages.aspx
19 http://www.joynlanguages.eu/
20 http://www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/modern-languages/project/euroversity.aspx
E-learning and learner advising

The Department of Modern Languages’ connection with teaching and research in the field of CALL goes back to the ‘80’s when CALL was first emerging as a field of enquiry in its own right (Hubbard, 2009b: 3). From 1989 until 2001 the Department hosted the CTI Centre for Modern Languages (CTICML), and was one of 24 discipline-based centres in Computers in Teaching Initiative established to promote and encourage the use of computer-based technologies in language learning and teaching. Since 1997 the Department has been responsible for developing and running courses in Advising for Language Learning both online and f2f. The School has a national and international reputation in this field and its online Postgraduate programme aimed at training online teachers in the specific skill set required for the delivery of online language teaching and learning. These modules are currently undergoing review in light of new developments in the technology being used in CALL, including the use of social networks and virtual worlds. The School is also responsible for the development and the day to day running of the Language Learning Centre of the University.

My role as designer, teacher and researcher.

Undoubtedly there are numerous advantages to being so intimately related with the broader context of one’s research project. These advantages include detailed knowledge of the context, easy access to key people and resources, access to state-of-the art research and thinking in the field, availability of practical support from the broader teaching and research community, and last but not least, privileged access to data. However, the challenges posed by taking on different roles within my project have been many and probably was one of the main reasons I adopted a research approach with was heavily “reflexive”. By using a reflexive stance I felt I was able to move away from my work in a way that would allow me to carry out my research task of breaking my research project into parts and putting it back together again without compromising the
depth of my understanding of how the parts interrelated and my deep connection to the
whole. The complexity of this project, however, was not limited to the multiple roles I
had to play but was also influenced by the multiple players and the different research
and development aims of our telecollaboration project as discussed in the previous
sections.

**Ethical requirements and considerations**

Action was taken by myself to comply with the research requirements of the Faculty of
Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Hull. However, as the course of the
research project was based on a form of online international collaboration, I strove to
ensure that, alongside the ethical requirements of the researching body (University of
Hull), I also took into consideration the ethical issues associated with the organisation
delivering the course (Talkademy), the institution providing the students (University of
Bielefeld) and the online platforms used for delivery of the course (Facebook and
Second Life).

As far at the learners were concerned, informed consent was obtained from students by
the University of Bielefeld upon enrolment in the course (see Section 5.1.2 on the
creation of an EP Learning Partnership above and Section 5.3.2 on the contribution of
the University of Bielefeld). In addition, informed consent from the students was sought
at the beginning of the course by myself as teacher and researcher and the research
focus of the course was reiterated at several stages throughout the duration of the
course. Consent to recordings was obtained at the beginning of each lesson and students
were given the opportunity to discuss the removal of data after the recording had taken
place.

As far as the teachers, designers and support staff were concerned, the nature of the
research project set-up was such that it can be fairly assumed that there was an implicit
agreement to take part in the research. In addition to this, all teaching, designer and
support staff were all to be considered staff working under the umbrella of the Euroversity Network for their respective institutions. All three organisations have signed agreements to the effect that all materials and outcome of learning events will be made publicly available to the Network for the Network purposes. For the two participants from the broader virtual world educational community, Kip Yellowjacket and Eduardo Valencia, informed consent was also obtained.

As far as the use of Facebook was concerned, KH from Talkademy created a closed Facebook group and was the sole administrator of the group. The group was restricted to those participating in the course. All discussions and postings within the group were related to the course and included comments by participants, the uploading of course materials and student created content.

As mentioned in Section 5.3.1 above, the virtual world space used for the running of the course was owned by Talkademy and managed for educational purposes specifically. When the students from the University of Bielefeld created their avatars to participate in the course, they agreed to the Linden Lab Terms of Service for Second Life (Linden Research, 2014b). These Terms of Service also apply to the other participants in the course including the teaching and support staff and the guests who were invited to join the course.

5.4 Course Design

The three individuals who took part in the design process were myself, KH and G.M-E. from Talkademy as mentioned above in Section 5.1.4. Upon entering the design process, we were not working with a tabula rasa but had a clear course description from the Language Centre at Bielefeld. In this sense the course requirements and the learning context of the Language Centre students were relevant and constituted information we were required to take into consideration in designing the course. In addition to this, as mentioned above, the Talkademy English Business Course had been run a number of
times by Talkademy in other contexts including one in which I had participated as lead
teacher but not designer in 2009 at the beginning of the Avalon project.21

5.4.1 Summary of main changes made to the existing course design
When I was invited by Talkademy to join the design team of their course, the
understanding was that I would be able to bring in any changes I felt necessary. I made
three fundamental changes to the course in connection with the following aims:
1) Make the course cheaper to run and more sustainable over time by relying more on
our existing virtual world educational community as a resource. In previous iterations of
the course, Talkademy had relied on paid native speaker and virtual world actors to
come in and carry out some of the presentation tasks for the course. The aim of this
approach was to make the course as exciting, realistic and convincing as possible for
students. I, however, had concerns that, while it undoubtedly is an added value to be
able to have outsiders contribute to the course, paying native speakers to do a job that
many native and non-native speaker teachers do in their everyday language teaching
(i.e. for the simulation of situations) was not fully justified. I also thought that it did not
make sense to be paying for something which I, as a teacher, could provide free of
charge as part of my teaching.
2) Make the Business Plan task at the centre of the course syllabus include the use of
the virtual world. In previous iterations of the course, students had been required to
work on a business plan for a product in general and the virtual world was used only as
an online “classroom”. This time, however, I suggested that we also invite the students
to think about the virtual worlds in relation to the marketing and delivery of their
products. I felt at the time that this would achieve a number of things. Firstly, it would
provide students with a deeper understanding of the environment in which the course
was being delivered. This was also relevant as we were asking students to reflect upon

21 A description of this course as it was tested and developed during the Avalon project can be found
under Course Scenarios of the Teaching and Learning Resources section on the project website at
http://avalon.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/.
this environment for learning as part of their course requirements. Secondly, it was also a way of making more of the virtual world we were using. It was an attempt to get students to move out of the virtual world classroom space and explore the virtual world and mine it for information. The outcomes of this process can be seen by the topics of the two business plans of the students who completed the course. One was a business plan for a Management Training Course promoted and run in virtual worlds and the other was a plan for a Virtual World Holiday Home Share Business where customers could visualise the home they were thinking of renting for their holidays in the virtual world. In both of these business plans, the virtual world is an integral part of the proposal.

3) Include within the activities of the course external experts who would be able to make highly relevant contributions to the students’ work and who were members of the virtual world community. In previous iterations of the course, the experts had been either actors or business experts in general. The change I was proposing was to bring in experts from the virtual world community specifically.

In short, the changes that were implemented indicate an effort on my part to some how “open up” the context we were working in and to attempt to make use of it in more meaningful ways according to my understanding of the educational potential of the platform at the time. However, it needs to be pointed out that the changes I made to the course were a direct response to the mandate I received from Talkademy and did not take into account, in any explicit way, the needs of my research project as such.

5.4.2 Description of the design process.

The design process was made up of more formal and more informal moments. Some of our conversations and exchanges of ideas had already started over the summer prior to the beginning of the course both f2f, in Skype, in Second Life and via email. The development conversations, of course, also reflected our previous collaborations and
joint-teaching ventures. Unfortunately, the bulk of the initial conversations were not captured as data. Indeed, it was not only until later, once the course was in full swing, that I realised the importance of these initial conversations in terms of the development of some of the key concepts and underlying assumptions we were all working with. This section on the design process is, therefore, also to be read as an attempt to capture retroactively some of the information and the thinking about the course which took place in the lead-up to the course implementation. These recollections have been confirmed and validated by Talkademy. The design process “proper”, in the sense of the part of the design process which was recorded and collected as data, took place a few days before the first lesson and was completed 4 months later in the week of the final lesson. In this sense, the design of the course took place concurrently with the course delivery and, as such, these two processes need to be viewed as mutually supportive and as feeding into each other continuously throughout the running of the course.

The design team aimed to meet once a week for each lesson. In each design meeting or encounter, a framework for the upcoming lesson was provided, the details of tasks and their implementation were discussed and organised, and the tasks were divided among the design team in preparation for the next lesson. In addition to this, we would analyse the previous lesson either in terms of our own impressions based on participation in the lesson or/and based on the student evaluation mechanism put in place by Talkademy in the form of a Votemaster board. The design meetings were loosely organised around the following processes: debriefing of previous lesson, planning of next lesson, assigning of tasks in preparation of the following lesson. However, even if all of these activities were carried out and were an integral part of the design process, the decision making process rarely occurred in an orderly fashion and often took place in discussions.

22 The votemaster board was one of the 3D objects rezzed by KH during the course. It looked like a quiz board where participants could click on the answer they wanted to give while remaining anonymous.
that were not officially part of the design process adding to the challenges of capturing first hand data about the design process itself.

Last but not least, all design decisions were made bearing in mind the overall aims of the course. In particular, we were committed to providing the students with quality language teaching and to ensuring that they were given activities and provided content that was supportive of their learning. In other words, we had a professional obligation towards the students to ensure that the course provided adequate opportunity for them to meet the course requirements set by the University of Bielefeld and to complete the course successfully just as we would do in the running of any f2f or other online course. As such, our research and development interests were at all times subordinate and supportive of the main course aim of teaching Business English.

5.4.3 Collection of data around the design process.

Data collection of the design process consisted of recordings of our Skype and Second Life conversations which would also often include screenshots of my desk top activity and any shared files we were working with. In addition to this, we shared an online Excel file (i.e. a Google document) in which the run-down or lesson plan was noted down and all preparation and follow-up activities were recorded. Emails between the design team were also included as data for tracking of the design process. Last but not least, the in-world builds, holodecks and the games and objects used in the games are all a reflection of the design process and can be viewed as data which informs this process. To conclude, the educational island of Talkademy in which the entire course in Second Life was run can also be seen as being an outcome of the design process. Indeed, it can be argued that the decision to use the pre-existing environment of Forum Europe for the course was a form of validation of the specific virtual world environment.

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23 “In-world” is a term used by residents (users) of Second Life to refer to Second Life. It means “in the virtual world of Second Life”. Here “in-world builds” refers to the 3D objects built or rezzed in Second Life.
by the design team at the time and as such it has been incorporated within the data of the research project.

5.4.4 Conditions under which we were working

As mentioned in the section on the description of the design process, although we had informally established a framework for the design process according to which we would meet regularly to plan the upcoming lesson, the process did not take place in a linear and predictable fashion. As with all real-life work situations (which this was for us all), the course design process was competing with other work demands and personal and family issues. In addition to this, the fact that we were working online from multiple Internet access locations made the scheduling and the access to meetings another challenge we faced. For example, it was often the case that one of us (usually KH) would be coming into the meeting from a café and not from home or from an Internet connection over a mobile phone or handheld device. Often participation in meetings was “on the go” for one of us in the sense that one of us would be travelling. In addition to this, the bulk of the course was run from all of our home locations and there were often family interruptions and distractions in the background. But this was, and is, our working context and the one from which we run most of our professional lives. As far as impact on the design process is concerned, having a team who was working online meant that often conversations would be interrupted half way, Internet connections would drop, the virtual world would freeze, decisions were left unfinished and, when pressed for time, the process would not always follow a logical order. Things were often followed up in an email or in the shared Google document to which we could refer in our own time. Decisions were not always carefully thought through but they were the best we had at the time and were such that they enabled us to move forward. Last but not least, many of the design decisions and debriefing and planning activities took place as informal conversations among us during the lessons while students were engaged in
group or pair work and could not hear us. Often, the debriefing sessions took place straight after the lesson as students started to leave and planning would still be occurring in the space 5 minutes prior to lesson commencement. Now, while it can be argued that this highly flexible way of working made it easier for the design team as the design process took place in a way that was convenient and efficient for us, it undoubtedly made the data collection of this process quite complex. In other words, information about the planning and the course design can pop up almost anywhere in the data and has had to be sorted accordingly. The data generation and classification process will be the topic of Chapter 6.

5.4.5 “Just-in-time” design

As a result of the conditions under which we were working as an online design team, I soon came to notice that we working with what I started to refer to as a “just in time” design process in the sense that each lesson was planned and designed very closely to the time of its implementation. While undoubtedly this process was not particularly stress-free, it did enable us to maximise the time we had available, focus on the most urgent issues at hand and adapt decisions and implementation of design ideas on the go. We were often able to adapt lessons as they were happening according to the number of students we had in attendance and in response to specific issues that arose. For example, we were able to pick up on information posted by students in Facebook a couple of hours (minutes!) before the lesson was about to start. One can argue that too much methodical planning or planning ahead would have limited our response to last minute information. As such, it is suggested that the “just-in-time” design process worked successfully by allowing us to use time efficiently and to react appropriately.24

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24 Just-in-time is an approach to supply-chain management which is well established in the field of Management and Logistics (e.g. Ohno, 1988) and more recently discussed in the field of Knowledge Management as well (e.g. Davenport and Glaser, 2002). However, while there are a few similarities in the general approach to the management of our design process, there is no intention in this dissertation to align the design process we used with the Just-in-time approach as discussed in the literature in any systematic way.
5.4.6 A flexible and fluid design framework

Another aspect of the design process that we felt was useful was the creation of detailed lesson plans that nevertheless allowed for the lessons to be adapted and modified on the go as the situation demanded. So, on the one hand we had a very detailed overview of how the lesson should/could play out while at the same time we were prepared to let go of this plan and let the events guide us. In particular, by keeping our framework open, we were also able to incorporate new ideas as they came to us over time. Indeed, the whole idea of designing the course alongside its implementation was so that the design of the course could be as responsive as possible to the emerging understandings about what we were doing and to learner needs. A flexible approach to lesson planning is also recommended in the CMCL literature on virtual worlds (Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010).

5.4.7 Designing for participation

As discussed above in Section 5.1.1, as a team, both Talkademy and I set out with the design aim to encourage learner participation, or our individual understandings of it, in the specific environment. This meant initially that we were aiming for students to take an “active” role in their learning. In particular, we designed for both role-play scenarios and games in an explicit attempt to build on the immersive nature of the environment in line with recommendations from the virtual world literature (e.g. Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; 2013; Harasim, 2012; Jauregi et al., 2011; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molkada-Danielsen, 2010; Salmon, 2009; 2011).

However, designing for participation was not an easy task as it involved both me and KH as the two key members of the design team unpacking and making explicit our understandings of participation. For example, what did “active” actually mean? It was not until half way through the course that, as a researcher, I started to understand the nature of the tension between me and KH in the design process. Once our different
conceptualisations became apparent, we developed a greater awareness of what we were trying to do and why we were doing what we were doing. In this sense the course design and its implementation were key in making teacher and developer conceptualisations of participation surface. My initial aim in relation to learner participation as a foreign language teacher was to ensure, in line with a Communicative Language Teaching approach (e.g. Hall, 2002; Richards, 2006; Richards and Renandya, 2002; Savignon, 1991; 2002) and as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 that the students received as much exposure to and opportunity to use the target language as possible in a structured and balanced format in line with the course objectives. My professional understanding was that this would be implemented through the design of specific tasks according to a Task-Based approach (Nunan, 2004). In my view, as a teacher, I played a key role in this process. Indeed, the virtual world literature points to the central role played by the teacher in creating a conducive environment for participation (e.g. Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010; Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2013). The critical role played by teachers in establishing and maintaining effectual communities of learning in language education is also discussed by Hall (2002) and reviewed in some detail in Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2 on Classroom Research. KH, on the other hand, was more interested in allowing learners to learn “by doing” rather than speaking and placed greater importance on the environment and learner scenarios as triggers for activity than on the teacher. KH’s understanding of participation as learner activity was based on Talkademy’s R&D need to find ways to use the environment in increasingly teacher independent ways. This approach to the design of the course, however, ultimately led me to feeling I was not connected to my students and dissatisfied about my interaction with them in support of their learning. My feeling of disconnection can perhaps also be explained by the fact that, as far as this specific course was concerned, all initiation activities and initial contact with students had been taken care of by Talkademy and
Bielefeld. This had meant that the only contact I had had with the students was during lesson time and the specific running of the activities. In previous courses I had run, my direct involvement in the student recruitment and initiation procedures had led me to be more familiar with the student body upon course commencement. This constant lack of knowledge about the students can also be observed in my frequent requests in the recordings throughout the course for students to provide me with information about their language learning backgrounds. Compared to other courses I had taught in virtual worlds, I was still mixing up my students until the very end of the course. This feeling of not knowing my students came into conflict with my beliefs about my professional role as a language teacher. As a result of this tension which emerged in the design conversations between Klaus and myself in preparing for Lesson 5, we discussed ways in which this could be overcome. I highlighted the need to include more conversational and “static” activities for what I referred to as “being” with my students as opposed to the activities that were designed for learner “doing” in the environment such as the games, for example, and activities that involved movement in the platform. In other words, I asked for more informal conversational opportunities and spaces within the framework of the course where I could focus on talking to the students about their learning and in relation to the course content. The provision of opportunities for reflection about the processes participants are engaged is considered to be an important part of creating and supporting a learning environment within the virtual world platform (Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010; Salmon, 2011). In the end, a compromise was reached for the second half of the course. This can be seen in Lesson 6 where we created tasks that incorporated both learning by doing moments and learning through language awareness and reflection activities. In addition, the fact that Lesson 6 was also a mid-course consolidation lesson, made the combination of doing and “reflecting” a natural choice from a pedagogical point of view for this specific lesson. The drop in
student numbers which took place at around that time also meant that even in those lessons for which we had designed activities based on games and learning by doing, opportunities for unstructured conversations about the students’ learning arose naturally. Finally, the increased focus on learner presentations in the second half of the course also led to the lessons naturally including conversations about course content in relation to students’ individual learning and proficiency development.

5.4.8 Challenges

One of the main challenges that arose over time for us as designers was the drop in student attendance. This often meant, for example, that tasks designed for groups had to be limited to two students (and for one lesson we had only one student in attendance). However, our flexible approach to design discussed above meant that we were able to adapt tasks on the spot and ensure that each lesson resulted in a meaningful learning event for those students who were in attendance (at least from our perspective), thus enabling us to move the course forward. As with most of the challenges we faced, we also often deliberately tried to turn them to our advantage when possible. For example, students who were not in attendance were encouraged to meet up either in person or online with the other students between lessons or to contribute to ongoing work in the Facebook platform. As teachers and designers we made an explicit effort to make sure that information flowed between the virtual world platform and Facebook in particular by posting snapshots of some of the key in-world activities, for example. This process of creating ongoing links between the virtual world platform and other spaces is also seen as key in sustaining the learner community over time (Molka Danielsen and Panichi, 2010).

Another challenge to the design of the course was that students displayed different levels of proficiency in English. Even though they could be generally placed at the B1+ level of the CEFR and had been screened accordingly by Bielefeld staff prior to course
commencement, there were noticeable discrepancies in students’ oral proficiency. In addition to this, students came from different subject backgrounds and some were more proficient in Business English than others. The problem was circumvented however by pairing students, when possible, in such a way that they were in a position to be supportive of each other or complement the other’s knowledge base. A similar approach to accommodating different learner needs has been discussed in Deutschmann, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2011).

Neither of the above challenges however were specific in any way to this course or to the fact that it took place in a virtual world. These are challenges that many of us face as language teachers in the Communicative Language Teaching approach and within the context of university language centres in Europe. However, I would argue that all of these challenges are more easily addressed with a flexible and adaptable course design whether teaching online or f2f.

5.5 Course Implementation

The following section will provide an overview of how the course was implemented by providing a description of each lesson. Each lesson description will include the following information:

- a list of the lesson aims;
- a list of participants by avatar initials and their roles as they appear in the virtual world data;
- a list of participants with either their avatar names and non-avatar names in the data from the Skype lesson recordings (Lesson no. 10);
- a list of the activities and tasks;
- a description of the spaces where the learning events took place in Second Life;
- a list of the virtual world tools used in the Second Life lessons.
In some instances, a snapshot from the lesson is provided to illustrate the environment and how it was used. As discussed in Chapter 1, these stills are for illustration purposes only. Each lesson description will be followed by a commentary where I will reflect on some of the most important issues that arose out of the lesson (teacher reflections). These reflections are the reflections I made at the time both in my conversations with the design team in our debriefing moments and thoughts I had that I had logged in my notes and observations of the lesson. These observations reflect my thoughts on the outcomes of the lessons in relation to the lesson aims and the learning opportunities provided to the students. I consider these reflections to be similar to the type of teacher reflectivity that I generally engage in when teaching though I usually would not capture it as systematically as I do here. The main focus of the reflections was to ensure that learning had taken place in line with the course aims and objectives and that the students had been adequately and professionally supported in this process. The final section will discuss how the course was evaluated separately by Talkademy and the University of Bielefeld in line with their own R&D needs.

Lesson 1 Getting to Know You

Lesson summary and aims

- The overall aims of the first lesson were for the students and the teacher to get to
  know each other, for the teacher to introduce the course and to familiarise
  students with the virtual world environment as a teaching and learning medium. The teaching and learning aims of this first lesson were to enable the teacher to get a general feel of the overall language level of the group, and to elicit knowledge from students about virtual worlds in order to start a discussion around the medium in relation to Business, Marketing and Business Communication in English in line with the course syllabus.
Chapter 5 - The Talkademy Business English Course

Participants

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 2 support staff (Yvonne Handrick and WickiNZ), 1 member of Talkademy staff observing as participant student (Konnyko), 7 students, (BB, FX, HTE, NA, OCH, TZ, VA).

Location in Second Life

- Forum Europe

Activities and tasks

1) Introduction and greetings. Introduction of the course led by the teacher. This activity took place in the Team Room. This space was a sitting room where participants could either sit on sofas or on cushions on the floor in an informal setting and in a circle facing each other. This space has been referred to as the Blue sofa sitting room in Chapter 7.

Still 1/5 Team Room.

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25 The name “Team Room” for this space comes from the activities that were carried out here in some of the previous iterations of the course. The name for the space was used initially by Talkademy staff members in our design meetings and was picked up and subsequently used by me as a way of identifying the space we were referring to.
2) *Getting to know you conversation led by the teacher.* This activity also took place in the *Team Room.*

3) *Exploring the environment.* For this task, students were invited to explore the nearby *Sculpture Garden.* This was a garden that was within walking distance from the *Team Room.* The students could walk around the garden and interact with the sculptures in various ways.

**Still 2/5 Sculpture Garden.**

4) *Debriefing session.* Debriefing about the students’ first experience of learning in a virtual world led by the teacher. The students moved out of the *Sculpture Garden* and back into the *Team Room.*

5) *Follow-up activity and homework.* Students were invited to explore Second Life and the links they had been provided with during the lesson to see how businesses were using the virtual world. They were asked to take a snapshot of what they found and post it in Facebook so that we could talk about what they had discovered in the next lesson.

*Communication Tools used*

- Voice-chat, text chat, IM, snapshots.
Teacher reflections

- This first lesson was preceded by two introductory encounters with students in Bielefeld to support them with the creation of their avatars and access and familiarisation with Second Life. Students were invited to go to Welcome Island\(^{26}\) in Second Life which is a dedicated area for newbies.\(^{27}\) Some of the students who had not yet had the chance to do this were helped at the beginning of the lesson by the support staff. The lesson ran according to plan and the online teacher-student conversations proceeded in a way that I found very similar if not identical to my experience of teaching f2f. In addition to this, comments were made about the appearance of several of the student avatars. This was a first time for me with student avatars as animals.\(^{28}\) The aim of the task in the sculpture garden was to help students familiarise themselves with ways of interacting with objects in the virtual world. The reflection session then attempted to ask students to describe some of their feelings they experienced in the sculpture garden and in the first lesson and relate that to the use of virtual worlds for the promotion of business and marketing. All in all, I felt that the lesson had gone very well, in particular in terms of student reflections.

Lesson 2 Presenting a Business Plan (aka the Subway Hat presentation lesson)

Lesson summary and aims

- The aim of this lesson was to provide students with an overview of what makes up a Business Plan, the type of concepts and language needed and the

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\(^{27}\) A “newbie” is the term used by experience Second Life residents or users to refer to newcomers to the environment.

\(^{28}\) At the time of my previous teaching experiences in Second Life, animal avatars were not available to newcomers as a default option.
communicative skills that are required for presentation to an audience (e.g. to investors and customers).

**Participants**

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong) and as guest presenter (Mats Maurer), three support staff (Claudio Whalen, Yvonne Handrick and WickiNZ), 5 students (BB, FX, HTE, OCH, TZ).

**Location in Second Life**

- Forum Europe

**Activities and Tasks**

1) *Second Life Business Quiz*. The students were provided with a quiz on a screen as an initial warm-up activity. The slides contained factual statements about money making and business activities in Second Life. The students were instructed to move into the appropriate coloured space on the floor (A, B, C, D) according to the answer they wished to give.

**Still 3/5 Second Life Business Quiz.**
2) Guest speaker. Presentation of a marketing plan by guest presenter with the virtual world avatar called Mats Maurer. This avatar was used by myself as the teacher using a second avatar on a second computer and using voice-morph. We moved to the Business Meeting Room for this activity. The Business Meeting Room is a room with tables in a horseshoe with chairs facing the front of the room where a presentation board is located. The environment uses dark colours and there are a few objects such as a window with blinds, a flower with flowers in it and a painting on the wall.

Still 4/5 Business Meeting Room (1).

3) Feedback and debriefing. Group discussion and feedback about the presentation in the Business Meeting Room.

4) Presentation of students’ photos. Students presented the snapshots collected as part of their homework project. The presentation stand and space was rezzed in real time in the space where the Business Meeting Room had been.

29 This avatar was created by Talkademy as a dummy avatar for use by others. It was given to me by Talkademy for this lesson. I accessed the avatar by logging into Second Life with the name of the avatar and the password for that avatar.

30 The voice morph function allows an avatar to modify the pitch and tone of their voice as it is perceived by other avatars.
5) **Debriefing session.** The group moved into the *Welcome Area*, an open space with cushions for participants to sit on in a circle. The *Welcome Area* is the area one’s avatar arrives at when teleporting to the Forum Europe from another area in Second Life or by following the slurl for the island.

Still 6/5 *Welcome Area.*
6) **Follow-up activity and homework.** Students were asked to think about a business plan for a product of their choice and be prepared to present their product briefly during the next lesson.

**Tools used**

- The communication tools used in this lesson were voice and text chat and presentation boards with language content and snapshots of locations visited by students. A voice-morphing tool was used by me as lead teacher to disguise my real voice during the *Subway Hat* presentation I gave using a second avatar.

**Teacher reflections**

- This lesson presented a number of challenges because of the different types of activities involved and the different uses of the technology (i.e. voice-morphing, the uploading of student snapshots onto the presentation board). There were also a few sound issues probably as a result of my using the voice-morph for the invited guest presentation. The decision to use me (the lead teacher) as a guest in the lesson was based on my design idea to use only the resources available to us in our own educational community. In the past, Talkademy had invited a professional Second Life actor in to give the presentation. The presentation was not as good as the one given by the actor according to the feedback from Talkademy but it provided ample opportunity for students to make a contribution of their own and, as such, yielded excellent language and content results. A wide range of language and presentation issues were addressed with the students and the aims of the lesson were achieved successfully.
Lesson 3 Business Plan ideas

Lesson summary and aims

• The aims of this lesson were to get students to come up with ideas of products or services that they would like to promote with their business plans. Students also chose their teams and began to work on their business plan structure.

Participants

• Myself as main teacher (Jole Zhong), 2 support staff (Claudio Whalen and WickiNZ), 1 member of Talkademy staff observing as participant student (konnyko), 4 students (BB, FX, OCH, VA).

Location in Second Life

• Forum Europe

Activities and Tasks

1) Presentation of individual business plan ideas. This activity started with individual work and then ended with the students presenting their initial ideas. This activity took place in a closed presentation area with high walls where each student had a space to work. The space was in the shape of a hexagon and each student had an individual wall to work on but was visible to the others.
2) **Selecting teams.** Selection of the ideas the students liked best and division into groups or teams. A game board was rezzed onto the floor of the presentation area within the hexagon described in *Activity 1* and the students could place their cones as votes on the presentation areas representing the presentations they liked best. The students then chose the teams they wanted to join based on the outcome of this game.
3) **Pair and group work.** Students worked on their products and their business plans in their groups. Students worked in private areas they accessed via the *Sky Tables*. The *Sky Tables* work as one long table in the main *Welcome Area*. Students can then be shot up onto different floors for pair or group work (private areas) and can be brought down again afterwards or can be joined by the teacher.
Still 9/5 Skytables (on the right).

4) Debriefing session. Feedback and planning of ongoing course activities with students. This activity took place around the Sky Tables as described once all students had been brought back from their private conversation locations.

5) Follow-up activity and homework: Students were invited to finalise the decision about which team presentation they want to join for the rest of the course and to think about how to move forward with their business plan. Students were provided with additional links in Facebook.

Tools used

- Voice chat, text chat and IM between teacher and support staff and between students and teacher. Presentation boards with access to Google for Internet searches. Sky Tables for pair and group work.

Teacher reflections

- This lesson provides an example of individual work, pair work and group work in the virtual world and the use of a game for decision making. I personally did not like the first presentation space in the shape of a closed hexagon as it made me feel claustrophobic (Still 7 and 8, Activity
The game on the floor became a bit messy as it was not easy to see where students had placed their preferences. However, the Sky Table pair-work yielded good initial discussions among students and the lesson objectives were achieved satisfactorily.

Lesson 4 Developing the Business Plan

Lesson summary and aims

- The aim of this lesson was to finalise membership of the presentation teams students wanted to be a part of and to allow them to start to develop their Business Plan in their teams.

Participants

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 2 support staff, (Claudio Whalen and WickiNZ), 1 member of Talkademy staff observing as participant student (konnyko), 4 students (BB, FX, HTE, VA).

Location in Second Life

- Forum Europe

Activities and Tasks

1) Greetings and informal conversations. Informal group discussion about ideas developed so far with the teacher. This activity took place in the Welcome Area.

2) Pair work. Students worked in pairs around the Sky Table to start developing their plan. Students remained in the Welcome Area but went and sat down at the Sky Tables. The students were far away enough not to be overheard by me and Klaus but were close enough to be able to call us over if help was needed.
Still 10/5 Students sitting at the *Sky Tables* in the distance.

3) *Business Roles Board Game*. Game with key concepts for the writing of a business plan. A board was rezzed on the floor in the *Welcome Area*. Students had to kick boxes with specific business roles or job descriptions written on them into the area they thought was relevant (Marketing, Sales, R&D, Finance).
Still 11/5 *Business Roles Board Game.*

4) **Pair work.** Pair work on the Business Plan using the **Sky Tables.**

5) **Group debriefing of their progress.** At the **Sky Tables** in the **Welcome Area.**

6) **Follow-up activity and homework.** Students were invited to produce one slide with their key concepts for their Business Plans and to prepare to present it to two invited guests.

**Tools used**

- Voice chat, text chat and IM. Notecards as part of the R&D evaluation processes (see Section 5.5.1 on Course Evaluation below for a detailed description of how the Notecards were used). **Sky Tables** for pair and group work. Game board and boxes for the game scenario.

**Teacher reflections**

- This lesson provided language and content input and a framework for students to develop their ideas further. It allowed for pair work, group discussions and a game. The game did not run perfectly as it was a last minute technical change to another game that had been planned. Part of the game (for example, the writing on the boxes) was hard to see as it
overlapped a lot and not all of the students were familiar with the terminology. There was a certain amount of tension between me and KH at the beginning of the game as I did not know what was expected of me and had trouble reading and moving the boxes. This all led to some students being more active than others. However, it also gave the students with knowledge the opportunity to share their knowledge with the group. Although there were some challenging moments I felt that the lesson turned out to be a good learning event. The way the game was structured also meant that KH could participate with his knowledge in the field of Business English.

**Lesson 5 Making Your Pitch**

*Lesson summary and aims*

- The aim of this lesson was to provide students with a realistic setting and context in which to present their Business Plans as they had been developed so far. The students presented their Business Plans to two guests. One of the guests is a virtual world teacher of English (DR, David Rinkitink in SL) with extensive experience of teaching in the medium and the other one (EV, Eduardo Gans in SL) is an entrepreneur in the field of media and education with experience of virtual worlds as already mentioned in Section 5.1.4 on the EP Learning Partnership at the beginning of this chapter.

*Participants*

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 3 support staff (Claudio Whalen, Yvonne Handrick and WickiNZ), 1 member of Talkademy staff observing as participant student (konnyko), 3 students (BB, FX, VA), 2
guest participants from the virtual world educational and development community (David Rinkitink and Eduardo Gans).

**Location in Second Life**

- Forum Europe

**Activities and Tasks**

1) *Business Plan box game*. The game was rezzed in the *Welcome Area* as boards on the floor listing some of the key points of Business Plan presentations in English. By clicking on the boxes in these areas, students’ chat statements were recorded and made visible to all. By the end of the activity, there were several student statements for all to see, collected in a logical way so that we could discuss the development of the Business Plans. Students worked in pairs with their teams and individually.

**Still 12/5 Business Plan box game.**

2) *Presentation to guest investors*. The students had 5 minutes of floor time in their teams to present one slide about their business idea to their audience. The guests then asked questions. This activity took place in the *Business Meeting Room*. 
3) **Feedback.** The guests provided feedback to students both in terms of business plan content and communication skills and language use. This activity took place in the *Business Meeting Room*.

4) **Assigning homework and preparing for next time.** This activity took place in the *Business Meeting Room*.

5) **Follow-up activity and homework.** The students were invited to work on their projects by developing the feedback comments they had received during the lesson from the two experts.

**Tools used**

- Standard communication tools as in previous lessons; game rezzed in the *Welcome Area*; the *Business Meeting Room* was rezzed during the lesson.

**Teacher reflections**

- The students were able to experience presenting to an audience with real expertise in the field and to receive feedback of high quality and inline with the end of course presentation requirement. I was very pleased with
this lesson as the quality of the feedback was extremely good and balanced as it addressed both content and language and presentation styles. I think it was important for the students to experience contributions and comments from outsiders and not just their main teacher.

Lesson 6 Consolidation

Lesson summary and aims

• The aim of this lesson was to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on and visualise what they had achieved so far and on ways of moving forward with their Business Plan. The entire lesson was focused around 4 different game scenarios to help students consolidate the knowledge gained so far.

Participants

• Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), two support staff (Claudio Whalen and WickiNZ), two students (FX, HTE).

Location in Second Life

• Forum Europe (Red stage, Second Floor).  

Activities and tasks

1) Reflection of learning and summary of course so far. A board had been rezzed for students to write on. Students listed those areas of their presentation they felt they needed to work on. The board collected the students’ thoughts at the beginning of the lesson and acted as a point of reference for debriefing at the end of the lesson.

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31 Lesson 6 took place on what Talkademy refer to as the “Red Stage” which is accessible via a teleport from the Welcome Area (aka the “Green Stage”) where all of the other lessons took place. This additional area is used by Talkademy when they have to prepare for a setting in advance and when the Welcome Area is being used for other activities at the same time.
2) *Language reflection Game.* The second activity was a game and took place in an adjacent space. There was a board on the ground with the relevant parts of a presentation (introduction, body, closing) and the students had to place boxes with language items into the appropriate square.
3) *The Good Presentation Quiz*. This consolidation game made use of a slide presentation with statements about the presentation of a Business Plan. Students had to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements by moving into a green (agree) or red (disagree) area indicated on the floor. The game was rezzed in an area adjacent to the arrival area of this floor.
4) **Language focus activity.** The text chat function was used by the teacher to provide an example of formal and informal English. The students had to decide whether the expressions were formal and informal and how they could be made less formal/informal or more appropriate for specific contexts.

5) **Follow-up activity and homework.** Students were invited to start writing up their business plan according to the information they had received about format, language and content.

**Tools used**

- Standard communication tools used in the previous lesson plus two board game scenarios and the whiteboard rezzed by KH at the beginning of the lesson.

**Teacher reflections**

- This lesson allowed for students to reflect on what we had done so far. The fact that there were only two students present did not affect the structure of the lesson plan. Each game gave rise to significant
conversations around language and content relevant to the course. I was very pleased with students’ reflections and the learning outcomes achieved. At the end of the lesson KH and I discussed the possibility of leaving the games set up in the space so that the other students could experience what we had done during the lesson. However, we also realised that the students in this particular course might not have time to come in but that it was an idea worth following up for the development of other courses.

Lesson 7 Writing the Business Plan

Lesson summary and aims

- Students were encouraged to think about their business plans in terms of very specific requirements. The aim of this lesson was to get students to start collecting and organising their content in greater detail in writing according to the standard requirements of Business Plans. This process was aimed at supporting their thinking process and provided them with a check list against which they could measure their progress so far and plan work in the lead-up to their final presentations.

Participants

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 3 support staff (Claudio Whalen, Yvonne Handrick, WickiNZ), 3 students (FX, HTE, VA).

Location in Second Life

- Forum Europe

Activities and Tasks

1) Greeting and updating of progress. Greeting of students and updating of team and individual progress in the Welcome Area.
2) *Pair and group work.* Students worked on materials in Facebook in a group and started to jointly write their business plan in an online shared document. Students used the *Sky Tables* to access a private space for this activity with their team members. I went up and checked on students during this activity and we exchanged IMs as an additional way of monitoring pair-work and of providing support remotely.

**Still 17/5** Students working on a shared written document around the sky tables in a private area.

3) *Debriefing of writing activity.* The students came down again from the private spaces they had accessed with the *Sky Tables* and they sat on the cushions in the *Welcome Area* while we read their plans and commented on their work for this lesson.

4) *Follow-up and homework.* Students were invited to think about specific areas of their presentation. In particular, they were encouraged to distinguish between information that was relevant to the customer and information that was relevant to the investor. Students were invited to identify what parts of their Business Plans were still vulnerable or underdeveloped.
Tools used

- Standard communication tools used for all of the lessons. Co-writing and sharing took place in an online shared document which was linked in to Second Life through a screen.

Teacher reflections

- Students combined individual writing tasks with shared writing activities in the shared online space brought into Second Life. There were a few problems with access to the lesson and students kept on coming and going. Not all students were able to work with their team members. I found this lesson a bit frustrating and I was also aware that students possessed different levels of written English making joint writing tasks challenging. However, the activity led to students identifying the key areas they needed to work on and as such meant that the lesson had achieved its aims. In addition, I also realised that I had perhaps not made particularly good use of the screen for the joint writing activity. It might have made more sense for students to write directly into the shared online document outside of the virtual world platform by opening up another page in their browsers. I think my main concern was that we were able to capture the activity in the virtual world for research and development purposes. The use of the screen meant that I could see what the students were doing and it could be captured by my recording of the virtual world. This activity would not have been visible to me otherwise. This is an example of how a research focus has determined how an activity was carried out. I do not think I would have used this approach had I not had a research angle.
Lesson 8 Meet Your Customer

Lesson summary and aims

- The main aim of this lesson was for students to present their plan to customers (and not to prospective investors as in Lesson 3).

Participants

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 3 support staff (Claudio Whalen, Yvonne Handrick, WickiNZ), 1 student (HTE), 1 guest from the in-world language-education community (Kip Yellowjacket).

Location in Second Life

- Forum Europe

Activities and tasks

1) Reading of and comments on students’ Business Plans. Individual feedback on students’ written work and learning needs. Welcome Area.

2) Presentation of Business Plan. The student presented her Business Plan to a guest customer. This was followed by a question and answer session. This activity took place in the Welcome Area where a board for the presentation of the students’ slides had been rezzed.
3) **Assignment of homework. Welcome Area.**

4) **Follow-up activity and homework.** Finalise business plans and prepare for the final rehearsal.

**Tools used**

- Standard communication tools use in the course. Board for presentation of slides.

**Teacher reflections**

- The lesson was shortened by 15 minutes as we only had one student in attendance. The lesson ran to plan even if only with one student. The learning and teaching aims were achieved and there was time and opportunity to provide the student with detailed feedback.

**Lesson 9 Final Rehearsal**

**Lesson summary and aims**

- The aim of this lesson was to allow for students to practice and fine tune their presentation in preparation of the final course presentation to be
Chapter 5 - The Talkademy Business English Course

held in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld the following week.

Participants

- Myself as lead teacher (Jole Zhong), 2 support staff (Claudio Whalen and WickNZ), 3 students (FX, HTE, VA).

Location in Second Life

- Forum Europe

Activities and tasks

1) Student presentations. Students presented their work and received questions from other participants. Welcome Area.

Still 19/5 Students presenting their work.
2) **Individual feedback.** Students were provided with individual feedback on their presentations in terms of content, presentation styles and language use in relation to their individual learning needs. *Welcome Area.*

3) **Follow-up activity and homework.** Students were invited to take our comments on board in view of their final presentation in class with the teacher from Bielefeld (DB) in the following lesson.

**Tools used**

- Standard communication tools used throughout the course and a presentation board with the students’ slides.

**Teacher reflections**

- The lesson went according to plan and students were provided with ample feedback. Their overall performance was graded a pass by me as lead teacher in the virtual world but the students were given specific areas they needed to work on. I felt that the goals of the course had been achieved and that all of the students had made some progress with reference to their individual learning needs and course content.

**Lesson 10 Business Plan Presentations**

**Lesson summary and aims**

- Final presentation of students’ work and awarding of end-of-course credits.

**Participants**

- 2 lead teachers (myself and D.B. based in the lab at Bielefeld), 1 member of the support staff in the lab at Bielefeld as an observer of the final lesson and member of the learning partnership (WickiNZ in Second Life), 2 support staff from Talkademy in skype (KH and GM-E), 2 students (FX and HTE as per their avatar names in Second Life).
Chapter 5 - The Talkademy Business English Course

Location

- Skype access for myself, KH and GM-E from Talkademy. The students and the Bielefeld staff were in the Language Lab at the Language Centre, University of Bielefeld.

Activities and Tasks

1) Individual learner presentations.

Still 20/5 Student presenting their work in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld.

2) Feedback on learners’ performance and awarding of grades

3) Learning partnership Round Table. This dedicated session was focussed on gathering impressions of the entire experience from all involved, i.e. the teachers, learners, support staff.
Still 21/5 Learning Partnership Round Table via Skype.

Tools used

- Skype video-conferencing platform.

Teacher reflections

- The lesson went according to plan. It was the first time any of us had participated in a virtual world course which had its final session in a real classroom with Skype access to the online teacher. The students and I were able to see each other for the first time. I was very pleased with the students’ performance and it was clear that they had taken on board the suggestions that had been made to them in the previous lesson. DB and I agreed on the assessment of both students and on their language proficiency development during the course. There was a clear improvement between the previous lesson and students’ performance in this final lesson. The students had also clearly developed in more general terms from the beginning of the course.
5.5.1 Evaluation of the course

In addition to my ongoing teacher reflection process throughout the course (self-evaluation of my own teaching and evaluation of students’ progress in relation to this), evaluation was carried out directly or indirectly also by the other institutions involved. While all of the evaluation processes are accounted for here below in the interest of completeness of my account, it needs to be noted that each process had a different aim and can provide information only in relation to the specific area it was attempting to evaluate. As a researcher with my own research aims, I was not involved in the evaluation processes carried out by the other partners.

Evaluation of the Talkademy R&D activity

Evaluation of the course was carried out as part of the ongoing R&D work by Talkademy. This consisted of informal and more formal evaluation processes. Due to the small number of students, a certain amount of feedback could be gained through informal conversations with students about how they liked the course and by observing their contributions to the course both in the virtual world and through their posts in Facebook. Needless to say, to a certain extent attendance was considered a criterion for the evaluation of the success of the course in terms of development. However, student attendance was often dependent on factors that were not related to the course as mentioned above in Section 5.3.2 and, in this sense, are of limited value. Alongside the more informal feedback on the course from students, Talkademy also put into place a more formal process and used two specific tools for the collection of evaluation data from students during the course. The tools used were a Votemaster Board and Notecards. The Votemaster board was a tool where students could express their opinions anonymously in quantitative terms about the lesson. The Votemaster board was a quiz-like board which was rezzed in Second Life usually at the end of a lesson. Students interacted with the board by touching it and indicating their preference
according to a scale that had been created for the specific lesson. Notecards were sent to individual avatar users. They allowed students to express their thoughts about the lesson in greater detail and as such provided Talkademy with more qualitative feedback. Indeed, as far as Talkademy was concerned, the evaluation process developed during the course was just as much about collecting feedback from the students as it was about developing virtual world tools for the collection of feedback for future courses.

**Evaluation of the course for Bielefeld University**

The main evaluation process of the course for the University of Bielefeld took place through the running of the course and the awarding of credits to those students who had attended the course regularly and completed the course assignment successfully. The implications of this were that the course was deemed as being equivalent to a f2f course in terms of the teaching and learning process and thus met the validation aim of the pilot course. Feedback about the course was also produced in the final Round Table discussion in the last lesson where all partnership members (students, teachers, developers and support staff) had the opportunity to provide feedback and thoughts about the course from their different perspectives. From the teachers’ perspective, we confirmed that the platform had allowed for students to reach the aims and objectives of the course and led us validating the platform for learning. From one of the students’ point of view, the issue of greater anonymity of the platform was mentioned as being useful in supporting language learning. This student also said that they felt more protected in the virtual world platform as they could not see the faces of those they were presenting to as one would in a f2f presentation. The student said that this led to them feeling less inhibited during the presentation and less scared of making mistakes. This first student also said that they had not been enthusiastic about virtual worlds at the beginning. It was pointed out, by Gerhilde, however, that this student had also attended the German for Beginners course also being run by Talkademy at the time. It was
suggested to the student that this could be seen as an indication of the fact that they had overcome their initial lack of enthusiasm for the platform. The other student mentioned that they had been sceptical at the beginning and preferred presenting f2f as they considered themselves to be an extrovert. It was pointed out to this second student that, despite their initial scepticism they nevertheless had benefited from the course and had obviously been sufficiently motivated to complete the course. WickiNZ, as support staff and e-learning trainee at Bielefeld, commented that she clearly preferred teaching f2f and that teaching in virtual worlds required a considerable amount of preparation for teachers. She pointed out that it was easy for students to get distracted and that she preferred being able to see students’ faces in f2f interactions.

5.5.2 The Talkademy Business English Course and Exploratory Practice

In this final section I would like to provide a summary of how the course discussed in this chapter reflects the tenets of Exploratory Practice (EP) as discussed in the Chapter 4. First of all, I would like to suggest that my action for understanding took place by accepting to collaborate with colleagues in the teaching and development of the Talkademy Business English Course. Secondly, the course around which the case study was built was inline with the ethical requirement of EP that the processes in which participants engage be meaningful for all. Indeed, I found that I had to take into consideration the needs of many players. These were the learners’ needs, those of Talkademy and myself as course developers, the need for the University of Bielefeld to test its course and my own needs as teacher and researcher. As designers we needed to design a course syllabus which would motivate and provide foreign language development to students within our mandate. My needs as a teacher were to make sure that my students were given all the support they required and the language input for their language learning in accordance with the course syllabus. My needs as a researcher were to identify and capture as much relevant information as possible with
Chapter 5 - The Talkademy Business English Course

reference to my research aims. However, in line with the ethical requirements of EP, it was also important that my research needs did not take away from my fulfilling the needs of the learners. Furthermore, I would like to point out no additional burden was placed on any of the participants as specified by EP. Indeed, as far as the students were concerned, all the information that was required from them surfaced as part of their learning activities within the formal running of the course. Students were not contacted outside of the running of the course and there were no additional requests imposed upon them. In addition, the discussions about the nature of virtual worlds for teaching and learning were embedded in the course syllabus. The outcomes of the students’ course projects (the Business Plans) demonstrate how the tasks were devised so that they could take both the learners’ learning needs and the R&D understandings we were searching for into account. Finally, EP suggests that our actions in the classroom are a way in which we express our understanding of classroom life (Allwright, 2003; 2005). A similar idea is also expressed by Hall (2001) when she argues that not only do teachers’ classroom behaviour determine how students react and behave in turn, but it is also the outcome of teachers’ beliefs, expert knowledge and personal experiences of language learning. In this sense, this course can also be viewed as an example of me and the other participants living our understandings and acting on our beliefs about learning and teaching. The case study is thus an attempt to capture and document in a systematic way these understandings through our actions and outputs including the course design. In this sense, our performance and our classroom interactions are a way of making our tacit understandings visible.

5.6 Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to provide an in-depth and detailed description of the course design and implementation at the centre of my research project. In addition, the chapter illustrates how the different needs of multiple participants were accounted for while
leading to different outputs. These amounted to course development for Talkademy, course evaluation for the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld and as learning and the awarding of university credits for the students who completed the course successfully. These outcomes, however, while relevant to a certain extent to my research project in terms of context, are not the focus of the research project itself. The R&D procedures and the teaching and learning routines of the specific online course have been presented, on the other hand, as key data generation processes of my research project. The description of the implementation of the course, for example, not only provides detailed information about each lesson but also includes teacher reflections, and, as such, will constitute the starting point for analysis in the following chapters. The final section of this chapter summarises the relationship between the specific course and Exploratory Practice as a form of Practitioner Research. The following chapter illustrates the research tools and techniques that were used to capture the data generated under the case study and the subsequent procedures for analysis of the data. In providing a map of the interrelatedness of the different data types and an overview of the complexity of the case study in relation to data management, the following chapter will illustrate the step-by-step process of moving from data generation and classification to a first level of data analysis.
Chapter 6 Data Classification and First Level Analysis

“There is no particular moment when data analysis begins.” (Stake, 1995: 71)

6.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the nature of data within this project and the interconnected stages of data generation, data collection, and data classification. In the first section I will look more specifically at the issues of data generation and collection and provide a discussion of primary, contextual and secondary data and their role in my research process. This section will also include the listing of data generation and collection tools and a discussion of recording applications, data storage processes and associated ethical considerations. The second section will provide a map of the data collected and attempt a first level of data organisation based on a review of the types of data collected and the research processes which generated them. The third and final section will provide an initial analysis of the data in relation to its relevance to the research project and will include a list of emergent contextual categories which have been identified as relevant to the discussion of the research questions of this project. This section will conclude with the description of an analytical framework for the analysis of the virtual world data in the following chapter.

6.1 Data generation and collection

According to Richards (2009: 33), observation and communication in almost any research situation will provide large quantities of information. We turn information into data when we record it and try and make sense of it (Richards, *ibid*). Under my research project, I have considered as data all of the information that was produced as part of my direct engagement with the teaching and design of the Talkademy Business English Course described in Chapter 5. The Case Study frames and captures data that
Chapter 6 Data Classification and First Level Analysis

was generated during the design and implementation of the course and it includes both primary and secondary data.

Building on Mondana’s studies of classroom interactions using video recordings (2005; 2006), Lamy and Hampel (2007: 184) distinguish between primary data and secondary data in their discussion of data in CMCL. Primary data includes recordings (audio and video) and documents ancillary to recordings such as objects produced, consulted and transformed by participants while secondary data comprises everything to do with transcripts and meta-data such as field notes and contextual and ethnographic relevant information. Lamy and Hampel (ibid.) explain, in particular, how data is to be understood also as its various transformations or modes of presentation such as a result of editing, transcribing and anonymisation. Table 6.1 below illustrates this further.
The following subsections will provide a distinction between primary and secondary or contextual data in relation to my research project.

6.1.1 Primary data

As far as my own project was concerned, I considered as primary data all of the data that stemmed directly from the design and the implementation of the course and from the recordings associated with these two processes. This included the recordings of the design meetings and of the lessons and all outputs such as written documentation of the design process (emails, lesson plans), the virtual world environments used for the
course, the tasks and the 3D objects used during the course, evaluation of the course as part of Talkademy’s R&D, general course feedback from participants as generated during the running of the course and teacher reflections that took place as part of the running of the course.

In addition to the above, information about the development of my own thinking in my role as a researcher which flowed from the reflexive methodology I adopted, and described in full in Chapter 4, has been captured as “reflexive” data. Documentation such as my research proposal and my annual research progress reports were also considered as primary data in particular in the shaping of my research questions. In this sense, it can be argued that the various drafts of my PhD are also part of the research data. Data concerning this process comes from the entire research project from its inception onwards and from the running of the course as discussed in Chapter 5.

6.1.2 Secondary and contextual data

Additional information which was highly contextual to my involvement in the design and implementation of the Talkademy course but not generated directly by or within the time frame of the course is considered secondary data within my research project. Most of the contextual data which is relevant to this research project can be found in the description of the Case Study chapter. In this sense, the description of the case study is to be considered as part of the data set of the project. Information that feeds into the contextual data generally includes secondary data in the sense that it comes from conversations and understandings that took place as part of the research process but which were not formally or intentionally captured under the project. As such, this information is fed into the project exclusively via my first-hand account of the events as I experienced them and as I recall them. Table 6.2 below illustrates the data types (primary and secondary) from my research project.
### Table 6.2: Types of data from my research project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data description</th>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>Origin of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recordings of the design meetings (audio and visual)</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Direct outcome of my research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recordings of the lessons (audio and visual)</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Direct outcome of my research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outputs of the design process in addition to the recordings (emails, lesson plans, task design, 3D artefacts, Talkademy Island)</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Direct outcome of my research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outputs from the implementation of the course in addition to the recordings (e.g. student evaluations of the course, teacher reflections, lessons)</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Direct outcome of my research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output from the research process (e.g. researcher logs, research plan, research reports, research drafts)</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Direct outcome of my research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual data including my background knowledge, first hand experience of the design and implementation processes, informal conversations with the design team and informal conversational interviews with other participants, institutional information about Bielefeld and Talkademy such as the Bielefeld course description.</td>
<td>Secondary data</td>
<td>Information not collected directly nor formally contemplated in my research protocol but which became relevant during the course of my research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.1.3 Tools and platforms for data collection

In this research project, the main platforms used for the delivery of the course (Second Life and Facebook) also acted as repositories of certain types of data. Where the platforms did not allow for the capturing of all of the data, activity was recorded via a screen capture recording programme. One of the advantages of studying learner interaction and exchange in online platforms is indeed the fact that a significant portion of that data can be collected within the platforms (Lamy and Hampel, 2007). However, at the same time, one of the risks of working with electronic online data is that the quantity of data available is huge, making data management one of the major challenges of the research project. This research project made use of both automatically generated data within the platforms of Second Life and Facebook and data collected by additional data collection tools and methods. All of the data generated under this project is in electronic format. This data was collected via:

- Researcher desk-top recordings
- Facebook
- A shared Google document spreadsheet
- Emails
- Researcher logs
- Second Life
- Interviews

The data collected through these different data collection tools and methods appears in two main formats: audio and visual. The audio data consists of the sound recordings of the online interactions between participants and any spoken text which has been recorded. Examples of audio data are the recordings of the voice-chats in Second Life and the design team discussions in Skype. The visual data includes all of the graphic information from my desktop as a result of the desk-top recordings. This visual data
includes the visualisation of text-chat as written text-based data and avatar movements in Second Life, the video-recordings of the final video-conferencing session in Skype and stills taken from the recordings of Second Life. In addition, all of the recordings of the virtual world lessons present visual, including textual, and audio data concurrently and as such are considered as multimodal data as defined by Lamy (2004) and Lamy and Hampel (2007) in Chapter 3. The methods used for the collection of primary data will be described individually below with reference to the type of data each tool was able to capture and its limitations.

6.1.4 Data collection procedures

This section will discuss the rationale for the use of each tool, describe how it was used and evaluate the extent to which it yielded relevant data. Each section will also provide information about the storage of the data and any ethical issues that arose as part of using the specific tool.

Recordings of the lessons

When making recordings of learning events in virtual worlds, Panichi and Deutschmann (2012) discuss a number of factors that need to be taken into account. First of all, the authors make the point that all recordings of Second Life events involve a unilateral vision of some sort. As the recording takes place through a desk-top based screen capture tool (virtual worlds do not have in-built recording systems), the recording captures by default the view of the virtual world through the user’s avatar as displayed on the screen of the user. In this sense, the authors argue that recordings are similar to direct observations in f2f contexts where what is observed is dependent on what the observer can see. The recording of the virtual world events is therefore limited to the specific avatar’s view. In my case, my recordings were limited to what my (teacher) avatar could see and hear in the environment. This meant that any private conversations between other avatars or conversations between avatars who were not within my
hearing range were not recorded and as such do not appear in the data. For example, when the students were engaged in pair or group work where my avatar was not present, no data was collected. In this sense, all of the data collected through the recordings comes from my teacher-led activities. In Practitioner Research, Panichi and Deutschmann (op.cit.) suggest that, where feasible, research in virtual worlds be conducted by more than one researcher so that the teacher avatar can focus on the teaching task and the researcher avatar running on another computer can complement the teacher perspective. Moschini (2010) discusses how multiple view points can be achieved in research into virtual worlds also by running recordings from several computers including the computers of the participants in the research project. Finally, Panichi and Deutschmann (op. cit.) point out that research projects into virtual worlds also need to be feasible and to recognise the practical framework in which they take place. Where only one computer is available for recording - as is often the case of the individual practitioner researcher - the authors suggest that researchers might want to use the in-built snapshot function to take snapshots of the events which can then be annotated rather than trying to combine teaching and recording at the same time. If the researcher does decide to record and teach at the same time, as in my project, the authors suggest that information about learner activity that is not recorded via the teacher-researcher avatar can be complemented via student questionnaires. In my specific case, on-going informal conversations with all members of the EP research partnership during the running of the course supplied my research project with additional information of this kind.

Each virtual world lesson and the final lesson in Skype were recorded using a desktop recording application called Screenflow run on the computer I was using to teach the course. Screenflow recorded all activity on my desktop including audio. Each time the recording was initiated, students were informed about it and invited to acknowledge the
fact and give their consent to the recording either in the text-chat or orally through the voice-chat.

Still 1/6 (L2R0M00.40) Student consent in the text-chat.

In the still, you can see the students providing their consent (ok) in the chat text on the bottom left of the screen. They are responding to my request for consent to the recording I have asked for using the voice-chat function. I explicitly ask them to confirm in writing in the text-chat. The following table presents the same text-chat sequence saved in the chat log. The time of the chat log is the Second Life time 8.13 am PDT. The same time appears in the original recording from which this still was taken.

Table 6.3: Excerpt from the chat log.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>User</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>Claudio Whalen</td>
<td>ok, Luisa, can U read the questions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>HTE</td>
<td>ok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>OCH</td>
<td>ok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>FX</td>
<td>ok recording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>TZ</td>
<td>ok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/11/03 08:13</td>
<td>Claudio Whalen</td>
<td>ok</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1 L2R0M00.40 means that the recording was from Lesson 2 (L2), recording 0 (R0), minute 00.40 (M00.40). This still was taken as second 40 of the lesson, right at the beginning.

2 The Second Life clock runs on Pacific Standard Time and Pacific Daylight Time in the summer. Here the clock is on PDT.
Screenflow was chosen as the recording system as it was an application for Mac computers and my primary research computer was a Macintosh. In addition, it was free to use and, after a trial period, I personally found it the easiest to use of the other applications I had had experience of. Screenflow was tested prior to course commencement. However, some data loss occurred during the first 3 lessons as a result of unpredicted events in Second Life. For example, sound problems that occurred during the lesson were fixed by me deciding to use a headset rather than to rely on the in-built microphone on my personal computer half way during a lesson. This action led to only my avatar sound being picked up by the recording system and not that of the other participant avatars. The data that was lost was limited only to the students’ voice-chat from the first three lessons. It took several attempts to understand what was happening as the recording sequence and the virtual world and communication tools used in each lesson were different. Considering that the data collected by Screenflow is both audio and visual I have estimated that less than 5% of the overall recording data was lost and no more than 8% of students’ contribution via voice-chat. In addition, the fact that I took part in all of the lessons meant that although I could not retrieve all of the voice-chat data I was able to compensate in general terms via my recollection of the event. Data from the text-chat, from my voice-chat recordings and visual data from the lessons was all used to supplement the loss of some of the student voice-chat data in the first three lessons. Where I have not been able to provide audio data from these lesson, annotated stills from the recordings have been provided instead.

All of the recordings were saved on my private desktop and in a Vimeo account for back-up. Vimeo was chosen as the files or the recordings were extremely large and there was no other practical way of transferring them to any other safe location available to me. In addition, Screenflow has an in-built feature which allows recordings to be easily uploaded to Vimeo. The recordings in Vimeo are password protected and
my account is not publicly accessible. The only two other individuals who have access to the recordings are Talkademy development staff and one of my supervisors.

A final consideration about the use of a desktop application for recordings such as Screenflow is that all activity on the desktop was recorded. This meant that all private IM’s to me in Second Life are visible in the data and that parallel activity in Skype, for example, has also been recorded. While this has no direct impact on this specific research project, it may be something researchers think about when making desktop screen recordings publicly available. Not only is consent of the students participating in recorded activity required but it may be that sensitive information of whatever nature from the desktop the recording application is being run from is accidentally distributed at the same time. Careful editing of the recording should, however, be able to overcome this problem. Finally, in this research project, all clips that have been selected and included in the discussion of the data in Chapter 7 are to be considered as integral recordings in the sense that they have not been edited further by me. The stills, however, have undergone an additional selection process whereby I have edited the irrelevant parts from the frame.\(^3\) In addition, all student avatar names have been anonymised in the stills so that they can be published without additional levels of protection. This process of anonymisation was not feasible for the clips and they have not been publicly distributed. Future research might want to consider additional ways of anonymising avatars in recordings. Indeed, a new feature of the Second Life platform now allows for avatars to change their names. It may be the case that in similar research set-ups to this one, the researcher instructs student avatars to anonymise their avatar names prior to recordings.

\(^3\) The electronic copies of the stills saved on the accompanying CD Rom to this PhD appear as they were taken and provide more contextual information than the stills included in the printed copy of this thesis.
Chapter 6 Data Classification and First Level Analysis

Recordings of the design meetings

All of the scheduled design meetings were recorded using Screenflow on my desktop. The recordings of the design meetings amount to approximately 7 hours in total. The meetings took place in Skype and in Second Life according to the agenda of the meeting. Sometimes we would move backwards and forwards from Skype and Second Life several times during the meeting and sometimes we would have both applications running at the same time. The decisions we made and the lesson plans that we designed were captured in a shared Google document. As discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.3, additional information was shared in informal email exchanges among the team and in informal conversations during the lessons when students were engaged in pair or group work. As such, information which was relevant to the design process was also captured outside of the scheduled meetings. The initial conversation between Talkademy and myself in which I was given the mandate for the course development was not recorded but has been described in the Case Study chapter. The description of the events and information in Chapter 5 has been validated by Talkademy and Bielefeld University. All the recordings from the design meetings were also uploaded to Vimeo for backup.

Recordings of practitioner/researcher think-aloud protocols

There are 4 recordings for a total of 25 minutes of practitioner/researcher think-aloud protocols. Think-aloud protocols are generally used to capture the thoughts of participants in a research project as they engage in a specific activity (e.g. Dörnyei 2007; Heigham and Croker, 2009). In my research project, I decided to apply this technique to myself as a way of capturing my thoughts during the two months of the course design and delivery. These amount to short recordings of my reflections about the lessons usually carried out immediately after the lesson or in proximity of design meetings. I did not record a protocol in relation to every lesson as often some of the reflections I felt I needed to make came out in the debriefing sessions or in the planning
session with the other members of the design team. The aim of these recordings was to capture my thoughts “on-the-go” about the lessons and the course design process as they were unfolding, with the view of capturing and documenting my thought processes, clarifying to myself what was going on and identifying the main issues for further analysis. While the main focus of the recordings was to capture my reflections as a practitioner and course developer, reflections in relation to my research project and from the point of view of my role as a researcher also inevitably appear. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, my multiple roles in the project were a given of the research context and could not be fully separated. Finally, the information that stemmed from these think-aloud protocols was complemented by information from the recordings of the course and the design meetings, the lesson plans captured in the Google doc, my researcher logs and my direct involvement with the entire project. These recordings were also uploaded to Vimeo for back-up.

**Facebook**

As discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.2.3, the online social network Facebook was used as the course blog by Talkademy and myself as a way of providing information to students about the course and the lessons. The information provided by the Facebook group has been used to complement and confirm information about the course description and implementation as discussed in the Case Study chapter. Facebook as a research tool was used as a repository of course posts.

**The Google document spreadsheet**

The Google document (Google doc) spreadsheet was shared between myself, KH and GE-M from Talkademy. It was used to capture decisions made during the design meetings and to plan for each lesson. It was also used by Talkademy to inform their R&D. The spreadsheet was used by myself for the running of the lessons and as a way of confirming and complementing information about the Case Study description. The
Google doc is a password protected document which is saved online. As a research tool, the Google doc served as a repository of course design decisions.

**Screenshot 1/6** Screenshot of one of the pages of the Google doc used for the planning and management of the course.

**Emails**

A total of 57 emails were collected and saved as data. The emails were mainly exchanges of ideas and confirmation of decisions and lesson plans which were exchanged amongst the design team members. The emails were stored in a file on my computer.

**Researcher logs**

The researcher logs are the collection of all my notes, my research diary, formal research documents, dissertation drafts and written reflections which were generated as part of my research project and collected throughout the entire duration of my research. This data is stored on my own personal computer.
Second Life

In addition to the recordings of activity in the virtual world of Second Life, the platform itself was also used as a way of capturing data. For the purposes of this project, the educational Island of Talkademy and all of the 3D objects and spaces used during the implementation of the Talkademy Business English course are considered data as they were endorsed as appropriate educational spaces for the running of the course by myself and the other members of the design team as discussed in Chapter 5. Access to the Talkademy Island is public via a slurl.4 The Island, the 3D objects and the Notecards sent to students were generated by, belong to and are stored by Talkademy. The Notecards I received from Talkademy are stored in my Second Life inventory5 as are the IM exchanges between myself (my avatar) and the course participants. The chat-log files were saved from Second Life onto my own computer and have been sorted by lesson date. As with the recordings of the virtual world activities carried out via my own computer, the chat-log information and the IM’s reflect the data picked up by my avatar only and do not provide information about chat activity outside of the reach of my avatar. Individual IM’s between course participants were not captured under this research project.

Interviews with expert guest participants and other informants

As part of the ongoing conversations and collaboration with the virtual world research community as described in Chapter 5, four non-student participants (DB, DR, EV, KY) were briefly interviewed about their impressions of the course based on their involvement. The interviews followed a very loose structure following an informal conversational interview model as defined by Turner (2010). According to Turner (op. cit.: p. 755), informal conversational interviews are not guided by pre-determined questions but follow an “off-the-top-of-your-head” approach whereby questions are

4http://goo.gl/LFwX6c
5An inventory is a folder where information and virtual world objects can be stored in Second Life. Each avatar has their own inventory.
developed as the conversation moves forward and are used as a way of capturing “in the moment experiences” of participants. Two of these interviews were recorded, and the outcome of the other two was summarised in written notes. The information gained from these conversations fed into the case study description but was not deemed as being directly relevant to my research questions. The interviews have been categorised as secondary data in Table 6.2 as they arose naturally during the research project and had not been formally planned within the research protocol.

6.2 Data organisation and classification

Once I had collected the data as recordings (audio and visual), in written format (text) and as 3D objects, I found myself wondering what to do with it all. This second section will thus illustrate the processes I went through in working with the data post collection. Working with qualitative data entails an ongoing iterative process of reading, listening, scrutinizing, reflecting, note taking, organising, rereading, re-listening and reorganising in an attempt to make sense of the information collected and as way of establishing the most appropriate way of moving forward with further analysis (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Creswell, 2009; 2013; Dörnyei, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Mason, 2002; Richards, 2009; Stake, 1995). As a result of this process, I was able to get a better understanding of how the different data generation processes were interrelated, of the different types of data I was working with and of which data was relevant to the answering of my research questions. Working with the data involved two processes:

1) mapping the data (organising the data in some logical order);

2) classifying the data (describing the data in terms of what it was and how it supported my research project).

Both of these processes required some level of analysis. In the first case the data needed to be presented in some sort of hierarchical or relational framework. In the second case, the data had to be described in relation to how it could inform the research questions.
6.2.1 Data mapping

The data map provided below in Table 6.4 is the final result of various attempts to represent the mixed data sets in a table. The mapping process started out a couple of months after the data collection process as I was starting to write a preliminary account of the Case Study and continued for over a year. It was developed in particular out of the need to organise and make sense of the complex data set I was working with in an attempt to describe the process as accurately as possible within my Case Study. In this sense, the initial aim of the data mapping process was to provide descriptive information about the research project.

Using a map system enabled me not only to capture what I saw but it also allowed me to have a visual overview. By using the map I was also able to determine whether data was missing and needed to be added, whether some data needed to be put aside as it became irrelevant or whether the data sets needed to be moved around within the grid in the interest of clarity.

There were two different approaches to data mapping and classification I started working with. One was an attempt to provide an overview of all of the data that had been collected under the project and had as its outcome one individual table (the final outcome of this process can be seen in Table 6.4 below). The other approach produced a set of tables which attempted to list or envision different ways of looking at the data in the interest of yielding results at a more detailed level. This set of tables aimed to include information about:

1) individual data items collected from each lesson;
2) the different artefacts used in the course;
3) data generated for each individual participant or avatar;
4) the process of reflexivity during the project;
5) the relationship between the different activities carried out under the research project and the data produced.

However, it was not long before I realised that I would not be able to provide an adequate discussion of my research topic in terms of both breadth and depth. In the end, I decided to discard the idea of mapping the data generated by each participant (item no. 3 above) as my research project was not interested in individual contributions and the individual learner as such but rather in how, as a group of learners, teachers and developers we were making use of the environment and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 in relation to my Exploratory Practice approach. I therefore decided to list in my map data from each lesson including information about the artefacts used during the course (a combination of item no. 1 and 2 above) and information about the different activities carried out under the project (course design, implementation and R&D) and their impact on data generation (data table no. 5).

In addition, I also decided that data concerning the reflective process (data table no. 4 in the list above) needed to be systematically mapped and included as one of the data sets as this kind of data was both pervasive to my entire project and supportive of my specific research aims. Not to include it explicitly in the map seemed to be tantamount to my not recognising its relevance to the research project. In order to formally include reflexivity as one of my data sets I went back and thought through the different forms and moments of reflexivity that had taken place during the project and then started to look for instances of when this information had been captured either intentionally (i.e. research logs) or unintentionally (in some of the recordings). To conclude, my initial working with the data led to two main outcomes: the need to keep a broad focus and the need to include the reflective data explicitly within my data set overview.
Chapter 6 Data Classification and First Level Analysis

The project overview table

The project overview table of the data is a comparative table which enabled me to gain an understanding of the data collected both in terms of content and format and of how it had been generated. In addition, it enabled me to see how the varied data items were useful to the project from different view points and how the various processes that occurred under the project fed into each other. This table was used initially in my first attempt to make sense of the data and has been added to and changed as my understanding of the data developed through my attempts to classify it. The table underwent several rounds of remodelling as a result.

Data generating processes

Ongoing analysis of my initial classification of my data ultimately led to my realisation of the different process involved in generation of the data and to a clearer understanding of their relationship to each other. The three main processes I had identified were: the course implementation, the course design and research activities. My main stumbling block in this respect was that I was looking at the various processes in terms of some sort of hierarchy or chronological sequence. It was only once I realised that the processes were concurrent and fully overlapping that I was able to pull the right threads and start to fully see the data set as a whole.

Evaluation of the data in relation to my research project

One of the outcomes of the classification process was that I was able to gain a greater understanding not only of the different types of data sets and how they were related to each other but also of how the data items were related to my research questions and to what extent they were relevant to my research project. Case studies, and, in particular, qualitative case studies, tend to produce large amounts of data, most of which will not be relevant to the specific research focus or which will have levels of competing
relevancy which the researcher will have to tackle (*cf.* Stake, 1995). This will lead to researcher decisions about which data to prioritise for the final discussion of results.

Working with my data this way enabled me to understand what made up contextual data, how it was relevant to my project and how I could use it. I was also able to identify missing data or the need to describe data in ways that would make it more visible and thus useful to the research project. As a result, there were two main slots into which the data fell in relation to their use for the project: the description of the case study and an analysis of participation.

*The case study description*

Indeed, it was upon completion of this process that the first full draft of the Case Study was put together. One I had mapped the various parts of my story and had a better understanding of the relationship of the parts to the whole, the telling of the story became easier. It was after I completed my first draft of the Case Study chapter that it became apparent that there was additional information which was relevant to my project but which had not been formally captured or recognised in the initial data collection process such as my own knowledge of the context and other background information to the research project. Once I had an outline of the context which I had generated through my description of the Case Study, I felt more justified in bringing in additional information about the context as secondary data. In this sense, the Case Study description can be considered as a data mapping process in itself as it enabled me to identify and bring into the project relevant information in a highly contextualised way.

Furthermore, as a result of the various cycles of reworking the description of the Case Study, it also became clear to me what additional information was needed. In particular I identified that there was a lack of background information about the students from Bielefeld and the context in which the course was being run in Germany. This information was provided via follow-up conversations with the key staff member of the
Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld and via access to online information about the Language Centre and its courses. This information has been summarised and included in Chapter 5.

6.2.2 The data map

The map presented in this section represents my final understandings of what constituted data, where it came from, the format it was in and how it all fitted into my project in general. For each data item, or set of data items, the following 7 descriptors were developed:

1) Data item number. This descriptor identified the data set with a number.
2) Description. This is where the name of the data item is provided.
3) Project activity. This descriptor identifies which part of the project the data belongs to in relation to the three main activities of the project (the design of the course, the running of the course and research) and in relation to my involvement.
4) Collection point. This descriptor identifies the tool or platform where the data was captured. This descriptor also provides information about the format of the data collected and storage.
5) Use for course. This descriptor explains the purpose of each data item in relation to the implementation of the course.
6) Use for R&D. This descriptor explains the purpose of each data item in relation to the Talkademy R&D process.
7) Use for research. This descriptor explains how the data item was useful to the research project. In particular, data was judged to be relevant to one of two research activities: the case study description and the analysis of learner participation in virtual worlds.
Table 6.4: Overview of the data sets collected under my research project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data item no.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Project Activity</th>
<th>Collection point/format/storage</th>
<th>Use for course</th>
<th>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</th>
<th>Use for research project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lesson plans and logs of the course design and development meetings and decisions.</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Google doc (written, text based data); Stored online. Access only by design team (password protected).</td>
<td>Provide teacher with a lesson plan for each lesson.</td>
<td>Provide Talkademy with data for R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Information about the course design process. This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Lessons in Second Life (1-9)</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Desk-top recordings using Screenflow (multimodal data). Saved as audio and video files on my personal computer and online on Vimeo (password protected).</td>
<td>Creation of content. Implementation of the syllabus. Learner formative assessment.</td>
<td>Implementation of the course as part of R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Documentation of learner participation in virtual worlds. This data fed into the analysis of learner participation (Chapter 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data item no.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Project Activity</td>
<td>Collection point/format/storage</td>
<td>Use for course</td>
<td>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</td>
<td>Use for research project</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Lesson in Skype (Lesson no. 10/final lesson)</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Desk-top recordings using Screenflow (multimodal data). Saved as audio and video files on my own computer and online on Vimeo (password protected).</td>
<td>Learner summative assessment</td>
<td>Implementation of the course as part of R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Data about learner participation in the course. This data fed into the <em>Case Study</em> description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data item no.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Project Activity</td>
<td>Collection point/format/storage</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Artefacts/games</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Desk-top recordings of the virtual world and of 3D objects in Second Life (audio and visual data). Recordings of the lessons saved on my own computer. 3D objects saved in the Talkademy repository in SL.</td>
<td>Creation of content. Implementation of the syllabus.</td>
<td>Experimentation of the use of specific 3D tools and artefacts as part of R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Data about participation in virtual worlds. This data was deemed useful for the analysis of learner participation (Chapter 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Talkademy educational island in Second Life</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Second Life; permanent space. Accessible online via a slurl. Managed and owned by Talkademy.</td>
<td>Location for synchronous teaching.</td>
<td>Location for R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Location/context for data collection. Data for research into learner participation in virtual worlds. This data fed into the analysis of learner participation (Chapter 7).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Data Classification and First Level Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data item no.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Project Activity</th>
<th>Collection point/format/storage</th>
<th>Use for course</th>
<th>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</th>
<th>Use for research project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Chatlogs from Second Life</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Log of all text chat from each lesson saved to the my computer (written text-based data).</td>
<td>The chat logs were used both as support of voice-chat communication and as a way of providing students with information about the target language. In this sense, they worked as a sort of in-world white board. The logs, were saved, and edited for distribution among students as a record of the lesson and study notes.</td>
<td>Provide Talkademy with data for R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Linguistic (written) data relevant to learner participation and target language use in virtual worlds. This data fed into the analysis of learner participation (Chapter 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data item no.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Project Activity</td>
<td>Collection point/format/storage</td>
<td>Use for course</td>
<td>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Course blog (Facebook group)</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Facebook posts (written text-based data and visual data). Closed Facebook group. Additional screenshot copies of all posts saved to my private computer.</td>
<td>Course management and asynchronous communication among all participants (teacher, developer, students and support staff).</td>
<td>Coordination of the course and communication with students. Monitoring of the course in the interest of R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Additional information about the course. This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Course design meetings.</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Desk-top recordings of developer and teacher meetings. In Skype and in Second Life (audio and visual data). Data captured also in Google doc lesson plans described in data item no. 1.</td>
<td>Development of course syllabus.</td>
<td>Development of the course as part of R&amp;D.</td>
<td>Additional information about the course design background. This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data item no.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Project Activity</td>
<td>Collection point/format/storage</td>
<td>Use for course</td>
<td>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Course design emails. Emails between teacher/ researcher and developers.</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Emails (written text-based data). Stored on my computer.</td>
<td>No direct use for course. It feeds into data item no. 01 and 08.</td>
<td>Management of the course design process and some input into course design data item no. 01 and 08.</td>
<td>Additional information about the course design background. This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Practitioner/researcher think-aloud protocols.</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Desk-top recordings (audio and visual data).</td>
<td>Indirect impact on course implementation.</td>
<td>Direct impact on course design (data item no. 01 and 08).</td>
<td>Data about the practitioner/researcher involvement in the teaching and design and development process. This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data item no.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Project Activity</td>
<td>Collection point/format/storage</td>
<td>Use for course</td>
<td>Use for R&amp;D (Talkademy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Research logs. Researcher notes about the research process from the running of the course until completion of the project (2 years).</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Formal research documents, informal research notes. Stored on my computer.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>This data fed into the Case Study description (Chapter 5) and into the analysis of learner participation (Chapter 7).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.3 First level analysis of the data.

Once I had a sufficiently robust understanding of my data set, I decided to take a closer look at the data itself both as a way of checking that nothing had been overlooked and as a way of thinking about how to move forward with analysis. My way of examining each data item or set differed according to the role it played in the research project and to the format it had been captured in. The qualitative analytical approaches I used were a combination of reading (of text and visual data), listening, observing and note taking as discussed in the introduction to Section 6.2 above.

When I first started working with my data, I started to look at those data items that were less complex and easier to manage. The first group of data items was made up of predominantly text-based data such as the virtual world chat logs, the Facebook posts and the emails between design team members. However, one needs to bear in mind that the majority of my data appeared nested into multimodal communication contexts and this arguably raises validity questions about categorising data according to one communication channel only (i.e. written text) (cf. Lamy, 2004 and Lamy and Hampel, 2007). The following summary and list is an attempt to provide a general overview of the analytical stages I adopted for each data set mentioned in the map above. While all data items were initially scrutinised in isolation, any attempt to do them full justice cannot but take into account the fact that the majority of the data collected under this research project was never used in isolation.

**Virtual world chat logs, IM’s and Notecards**

The focus of my analysis of the virtual world chat logs (data item no. 6 in Table 6.4 above) was to look at how the text-chat function had been used in the course. I found that the use in this course was in line to what I had observed in other contexts and evidenced in the literature (e.g. Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009b; Wigham, 2012;
Wigham and Chanier, 2014; in press), that is, the text-chat played a supportive and complementary role to the voice-chat function. As far as the chat-logs themselves are concerned, however, it needs to be noted that the format of a log is not the way the text-based chat appears in the virtual world and can be considered as a first form of transformation of the original data as discussed by Lamy and Hampel (2007). An example of what the chat-log looks like out of context is provided in Table 6.3 above. Nevertheless, the fact that I was able to go to the recordings and see how the text-chat content had been used in context - and what it looked like in context - compounded with my first hand experience of running the course, enabled me to establish with some certainty that my analysis of the chat-logs actually reflected the use of the text-chat in the course.

Finally, there were also a few (approximately 6) instances of IM (instant messaging) and use of Notecards (approximately 3) but an initial analysis of content enabled me to establish that it did not warrant further investigation.

The course blog (Facebook)

The aim of my initial analysis of the Facebook posts (data item no. 7 in Table 6.4) was to see how they had been used in the course and to examine how they complemented and cross-checked other information about the running of the course in the description of the Case Study. The total number of posts was approximately 80 and included both written posts and the uploading of snapshots from the virtual world and powerpoint slides and materials for the course. However, as indicated in the data map in Table 6.4 above, the Facebook information fed primarily into the Case Study description and was not tagged as being useful for the analysis of learner participation in virtual worlds as it was limited mostly to postings about homework and course attendance.
Emails

The emails (data item no. 9 in Table 6.4) were collected as a data set after the course and served primarily as a way to complement and crosscheck other information I had gathered about the design process from the recordings of our meetings and from the Google doc lesson plans. The focus of my initial analysis was to confirm information that fed into the description of the Case Study. The first round of analysis revealed that there was nothing in the email exchanges in relation to my research questions to warrant further attention neither did they supply me with any additional information that had not been captured elsewhere. I was thus able to dismiss them early on in my analysis.

Lesson plans and the design log

My initial analysis of the Google doc collection of lesson plans and the summary of the course design process (data item no. 1 in Table 6.4) revealed that its main contribution to the research project was to provide data for the Case Study description and to act as a record against which to discuss the implementation of the course. The data in the Google doc was text-based.

Research logs

This data set includes all of my writings as a researcher during the lifespan of my research project (data item no. 11 in Table 6.4). The focus of my analysis was to establish to what extent this information was relevant to my research project as a whole and to my investigation of learner participation. In particular the research logs provided me with information about my reflexive methodology. All of this data was text-based.

Virtual world artefacts

The next set of data items that I processed were the three dimensional objects or Second Life artefacts (data item no. 4 in Table 6.4) used during the course including the Talkademy educational Island (data item no. 5 in Table 6.4). This data was available to me in the recordings from the lessons in Second Life (data item no. 2 in Table 6.4). A
first level of analysis indicated that they were ready for further analysis as visual data within the context of lesson delivery. However, if needed, there was also the option of creating stills of the artefacts and scenarios from the recordings and to analyse the data as still visual data (in contrast with moving image combined with audio). However, this additional level of analysis was not required at this stage. Indeed, the main focus of my first round of analysis was to ensure that the objects and artefacts did indeed reflect the decisions made in the design of the course and captured in the recordings of the meetings and in the Google doc of the lesson plans. As with some of the other data items in this section, the first level of analysis was mostly a validity check and an attempt to classify the data in terms of its ability to inform my research project.

Recordings

There were three main recording data sets collected under the project: recordings of the lessons, of the design meetings and of practitioner/researcher reflections in the format of think-aloud protocols. All of the data in the recordings can be considered multimodal as it involved the use of a number of combinations of communicative channels and included extensive amounts of audio data in combination with graphic/visual data (i.e. the recordings of my desk-top activity). In approaching the recordings for the first time, I decided that the sheer quantity of the data (over 20 hours of recordings) made it impossible to attempt transcriptions of the audio data. Without additional scrutiny, it was not it possible to identify at this early stage what parts of the data would require transcribing. In addition, the fact that I had decided to adopt a broad approach to looking at my data (see the introduction to Section 6.2) meant that my primary interest was more on how the different parts of my project came together rather than on micro-level analysis. In other words, in this initial stage, my aim was to get a feel for the data as a whole. Furthermore, as my focus was on participation in a multimodal environment, I felt that any attempt at data reduction or simplification via transcription
in particular of the recordings of the lessons ran the risk of moving me away from my context of observation rather than closer to it. An example of this is the visible difference in the data presented in context in Still 1/6 and in Table 6.3. Indeed, in the end - and as I will show in Chapter 7 -, I decided on presenting the virtual world data as multimodal data in context and to treat it primarily as visual data rather than textual data. Not only did I feel that this did greater justice to the data but I also I felt that the use of a new analytical approach compared to the methods used in previous research reviewed in detail in Chapter 4 enabled me to do fuller justice to the exploratory aim of my research project as well. Last but not least, the decision to experiment with a new analytical approach based on the observational technique of visualization as discussed in Mason (2002), for example, also reflected the call in the literature for more multimodal approaches to research in CMCL (e.g. Flewitt et al., 2009; Lamy, 2004, Lamy and Hampel, 2007). The steps of visual analysis will be discussed in full in Chapter 7.

In the first round of analysis, the recordings were initially reviewed as follows. The three sets of recordings were listened to in a sequence based around each lesson. In other words, for each lesson, I listened to and observed the lesson, the design meetings and the practitioner/researcher reflections for that lesson. At the end of each lesson sequence I also cross-checked all information from my other data sources such as the Google doc of the lesson plans, the emails, the Facebook posts and any relevant researcher reflections from the researcher log documentation. This process enabled me to obtain an understanding of the data as it related to each lesson. Finally, the aim of this process of analysis was to identify data which could inform the Case Study description on the one hand, and to start to open up the data for further analysis, on the other, through the creation of researcher memos. Richards (2009) highlights the importance of writing researcher memos when analysing qualitative data as the primary route of
moving from raw data up to developing categories with the aim of building theory and ultimately developing research outcomes. This process of making sense of qualitative data though the creation of categories based on empirical data is endorsed across the qualitative research literature in general (e.g. Creswell, 2009; 2013; Dörnyei, 2007; Mason, 2002, Stake, 1995; Richards, 2003) and is considered as the main process by which the researcher is able to move from large complex data sets which are typical of qualitative research to a more abstract level of understanding of the information provided by the data. In addition, Richards (op.cit.: p. 89) discusses how the writing of memos also adds to the data generated under a research project. She argues that this data should be included in the data set for the research project alongside the other data collected specifically as part of the research design.

This process of observation and note taking was carried out with a very short time span (1-3 days) to ensure a holistic view of each lesson. The observations and note taking process took place eight months after the original recordings and lasted for a period of about 3 months. In this sense one might argue that this process took place sufficiently close to the original event for the data to be more or less accurately complemented by my first-hand knowledge of the event but also at a distance that allowed for a certain detachment from the original event.

The analysis of the recordings can be described as taking place in different stages. One could argue that my first hand experience of running and designing the course somehow already constituted a first level or stage of analysis. It could be suggested that already during the lessons I was making more or less conscious decisions about what I thought was relevant and important to my research project. Furthermore, one could argue that when I came to listen to my recordings and started to jot down some of my observations I was by no means listening to everything and that some very selective listening and observing was taking place. However, the qualitative research literature actually points
to the need for a certain amount of focus of the researcher at the observation stage (e.g. Mason, 2002). For example, Stake (1995) suggests that the case study researcher needs to work at finding the right balance between listening broadly and being open to the unexpected and listening in a more attentive way for information which is more likely to contribute to the answering of his or her research questions.

**Analysis of the lessons**

For each lesson recording I took notes which could be loosely divided into descriptive notes (i.e. a description about the activities and the lesson) and reflections and observations about the lesson and how I thought it related to the research project in general and to my research questions in particular. For each lesson, I listened to and observed the recordings, took handwritten notes for that lesson and then wrote the notes up in electronic format before moving on to the next lesson. This first round of analysis of the recordings of the lessons led me to identify this data, over all data sets, as being the most useful for an analysis of learner participation in virtual worlds as it was the only one that provided for direct observation of learner interaction in the virtual world. Once I had identified the importance of this particular data set, I thus proceeded with a second round of analysis of the virtual world lessons. This process led me to observe that the most useful way of looking at learner participation in the virtual world at this initial stage was to make a distinction between verbal activity (target language use) and non-verbal activity. This understanding of learner participation as target language use is consistent with the discussion about learner contributions to language learning within the Communicative Language Teaching approach discussed by Breen (2001) and reviewed in Chapter 2. The understanding of learner participation in virtual worlds as the combination of verbal and non-verbal interaction in language learning in the virtual world is confirmed in the recent discussion by Wigham and Chanier (2013) included in my review in Chapter 3 and reviewed in relation to existing research foci and
approaches in Chapter 4. In addition, this second round of analysis of the virtual world data led me to observe that information about the affective dimension of participation in relation to language learning as discussed in chapter 2 and 3 was limited in the data. What the virtual world did offer was visual information about task design which had been highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3 has having an impact along with the affective dimension on the discussion of participation. The outcome of this additional round of analysis led me thus to identify verbal and non-verbal interactions of learners in the virtual world as my starting point for a discussion around participation in my context.

**Analysis of the design meetings**

An identical process as the one described for the lesson recordings was followed for the recordings of the design meetings. Here my focus was mainly to ensure that all information about the running of the course was accurate and that I could trace all decisions from the planning stage to the implementation stage as precisely as possible. All information from these recordings was cross-checked with the other data sets in particular the Google doc lesson plans and the Facebook posts and the recordings of the lessons. The first round of analysis revealed that this data was relevant to the building of the Case Study description.

**Analysis of the think-aloud practitioner/researcher protocols**

Not every lesson produced a think-aloud practitioner/researcher reflection. Some of my thoughts at the time are listed in the researcher logs and emails, and sometimes they were more or less informally included in my debriefing of the lessons with Talkademy in the recordings of the design meetings. The first round of analysis revealed that this data was mainly relevant to the building of the Case Study description.

**6.3.1 Analysis of the researcher memos**

As discussed in the section above on Recordings with reference to Richards (2009), the memos produced as part of my first round of analysis can also be considered as data
under the project. If we take a more detailed look at the stages of memo writing of my specific research project, these can be summarised as follows. The first writings were notes I jotted down as I was listening and looking at the recordings of design meetings and practitioner/researcher think-aloud protocols (which were predominantly audio recordings) and the recordings of the multimodal data from the lessons. As far as the recordings of the multimodal data from the lessons were concerned, this meant listening both for what was being said and also looking at how we were making use of the environment at the same time (i.e. listening to what we were saying and looking at what we were doing).

The second stage of this process of memo writing was to write up the handwritten notes in electronic format. I made an effort to carry out this second task as closely as possible (within a few days) to the first task of taking handwritten notes so as to ensure that my recollection of my observations was as accurate as possible. Of course, in those few instances where I was not convinced that the notes I had taken were reflecting what was going on or what I was trying to say at the time, it was always possible for me to go back and check the original recordings. As mentioned above in the section on the Analysis of the Lessons, some of my notes would be a description of what was going on while other notes were observations or comments which seemed to be important to me at the time in relation to my research project in general and my research questions in particular. Finally, it needs to be noted that the memos are a reflection of my personal reading of the data which inevitably drew on my first-hand experience of the course, my background knowledge of the context and my expertise as a virtual world practitioner. In a sense, my process of memo writing can be seen as a form of brainstorming based on my observation of the data and my intimate knowledge of the context. In a way, I saw the analytical process as an ongoing conversation between myself and the data.
During this multi-tier phase of observing, note taking and writing, it was as if my observations and comments underwent a process of distillation or abstraction typical of qualitative analysis (cf. Mason, 2002; Richards, 2003; L. Richards, 2009; Stake, 1995). Indeed, the further I got away from the recordings of the event, the more abstract my comments became. It was at this point that I was able to notice that there were recurring areas of relevance in my notes. In other words, by the time I had arrived at the end of this process, I had come up with a list of 6 main categories or issues and one minor additional category to which the data, or rather my observations of the data, were constantly referring to. At the end of my note writing process I was able to place each comment or memo into one of these categories. All comments and observations were coded accordingly in my records and sorted into files tagged by category. In this way I was able to have all the comments and memos related to one category or topic from different parts of the data sets together in one place. Where a comment was informing more than one issue, it was tagged accordingly and appeared in both or all of the categories it was informing. I was guided in my placement in particular by analysing each observation in terms of the main issue I thought it was addressing. I reached the end of this process when I had arrived at the point of saturation of the data (e.g. Dörnyei 2007: 244; L. Richards, 2009; 144). This cycle was completed when there were no more categories of relevance that had emerged and all of the notes and observations could be placed within at least one of the categories. To conclude, a correlation analysis of the number of memos and the number of words produced per category indicated that I had been consistent in my memoing across the categories. The 6 main categories are listed as follows:

1) The virtual world platform
2) Language learning and teaching
3) The context
4) The course design

5) Research methodology

6) Participation

These categories are explained as follows:

*The virtual world platform*

The main focus of the memos collected within this category was to document our use of the platform and to attempt to explore our rationale for its use within the course. It also includes my reflections around the experience.

*Language learning and teaching issues*

This category includes my reflections about teaching and learning in the context, my personal experience of teaching in the context, teaching management issues and the role of the virtual world in relation to teaching.

*The context*

The focus of memos in this category was to reflect on the general context of the course including issues such as the collaboration between me and Talkademy, student attendance, the role of the different participants, additional background knowledge.

*The course design*

This category includes memos about the design and development process. Some of the memos provided a documentation of the course evaluation that fed into the R&D process. Evaluation memos were tagged with the letter “E” but included in this category as part of course design and development.

*Research methodology.*

Annotations and memos in this category can be seen as part of my reflexive approach to my research project and list my reflections about how my research approach was shaping and being shaped by my research context. The observations about research
methodology are clearly not relevant to the topic of participation as such but include reflections on research procedure.

**Participation**

The main focus of memos that come under this category was to explore different ways of thinking about participation and in particular as an attempt to see whether it was possible to go beyond conceptualisations of participation as provided by the literature I had reviewed. In addition, the focus of this section was to probe the relationship between participation and the other identified categories. In this sense, memos and observations in this category attempted to find ways of linking the different categories and thinking about them as part of a whole.

To conclude, the outcome of the creation of categories based on my memo data set was thus the emergence of what I saw as being “issues of relevance” or key areas of my research project that made up the context for my analysis proper of the virtual world data in Chapter 7. When combined with my definition of participation as learner activity as discussed in the *Analysis of the lessons* in Section 6.3, I would like to suggest that an additional result of this analysis was that I was also able to make a distinction between participation as something you could “see” on the one hand and issues that played a role in determining visibility of participation on the other.

**6.3.2 A framework for analysis of learner participation**

My first round of analysis of the data reviewed in this chapter provided me with two main outcomes. Firstly, I had identified verbal and non-verbal activity in the virtual world as the lowest possible denominator from which to start my discussion of learner participation. Secondly, I had been able to confirm the salience of the context and the design process in relation to a discussion of learner participation. Thus, it was within the framework of learner activity in context that I proposed to base my discussion of learner participation in relation to the virtual world data. The most significant step in my
research was, however, what I refer to as “the visual turn” or the decision to analyse learner activity in context as visual data. This decision was based on a close analysis of the nature of the data I was handling.

6.4 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the initial classification of the data collected as part of this research project based on how it was generated, the format it was collected in and its general use for the project. There are four main outcomes for my research project from this chapter. The first outcome is the distinction between data that feeds into the case study description and data which is directly relevant to an analysis of learner participation in virtual worlds. The second outcome is an initial definition of participation as both learner verbal and non-verbal activity. Thirdly, the memo writing process described in this chapter has identified the issues of relevance for the discussion of learner participation in the following chapter. The final outcome has been to recognition of the need to analyse the virtual world data as visual data.

The following chapter will, thus, focus on a discussion of learner activity in the virtual world in relation to the affordances of the virtual world, associated language learning and teaching issues and the specific context of the course design. It will achieve this through a systematic visual analysis of learner activity as it manifests itself in the recordings.
Chapter 7 Learner Participation

“Visual data should be thought of not in terms of what the camera can record but of what the eye can see” (Emmison and Smith, 2000: 2-4 cited in Mason, 2002: 104).

7.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis and discussion of learner participation in relation to the features of the virtual world platform used during the implementation of the Talkademy Business English Course described in Chapter 5. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part (Sections 1, 2 and 3) provides an analysis of participation in relation to the affordances of the virtual world and with reference to the analytical framework developed in Chapter 6. The second part (Section 4) will discuss the outcomes of this analysis within the context of the research project.

According to Mason (2002:148), data can be read literally, interpretatively and reflexively, an approach which can also be extended to visual data (op.cit. 115) and many qualitative researchers engage in all three readings (op.cit. 149). Literal reading is descriptive, while interpretative reading involves providing explanations and interpretations of why things are the way they are and of their significance in context. Finally, a reflexive reading of the data examines the researcher’s relationship to the data and how it may have been shaped as a result of the researcher’s behaviour. In my analysis below, I intend to read the virtual world data from all three perspectives.

The analytical framework which has been developed for a reading of the virtual world data is based on a definition of learner participation as learner verbal activity (target language use) and learner non-verbal activity as discussed in the previous chapter. This definition of learner participation is understood to include the use of the basic communication channels of voice-chat and text-chat and all non-verbal activity in the
virtual world platform carried out by the students within the context of the course. In general terms this includes student avatar movement within the learning space and interaction with 3D objects. Examples of learner linguistic contributions via additional channels to text-based and voice-chat will also be discussed. All data is presented either as stills from the recordings or as clips taken from the recordings. All stills and data are tagged with the lesson number (L) they refer to, the recording number for that lesson (R) and a time reference in minutes (M). For example, Still no. 1 in this chapter is listed as Still 1/7 (L2R0M17.02). Clip no. 1 one in this chapter is listed as Clip 1 (L1R1M21.18-23.33) and specifies the beginning and end time of the clip. All clips are water marked “Demo Mode” as I was using the free recording application. Finally, as discussed in Chapter 6, the stills have undergone minor editing in the sense that all student names have been cancelled out as a part of the anonymisation procedures. The clips in this chapter were accessible to my PhD examiners on the CD Rom included with the soft-bound copy of my PhD. Access to the clips can be obtained by contacting the author directly. As far as the stills from the Skype recordings are concerned, students’ faces have been covered up. I would also like to argue that the selection of the stills I have created from the recordings and the clips of the recordings I have included for discussion in this chapter can be considered an act of interpretation as well. Indeed, the selection is based on my initial reading of the data and my judgement of which stills and clips best represent and illustrate what was going on at the time. Furthermore, in this chapter, description and interpretation are to be viewed as part the same analytical process (e.g. Alveson and Skölberg, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Mason, 2002). This is in line with the discussion in Mason (2002: 104) where analysis of visual data is considered to include both what can be captured by recordings and how we interpret what we can see.
7.1 Avatars and learner participation

All students in the course were represented by a Second Life avatar. The creation of an avatar was the first step towards enabling the student to enter the virtual world platform and which allowed the student to activate all the communication tools. Through one’s avatar, the user or student can “see”, “hear” and “act”. As discussed in Chapter 5, students were provided with support during the induction meetings on how to create an avatar and the basic skills of interaction in the environment. This stage corresponds to Salmon’s (2011) description of the first step of interactivity in virtual worlds as access and motivation illustrated in Chapter 3. In this sense it can be argued that the course framework provided the students with the minimum participatory skills they would require for the course both in terms of access and basic interaction.

Once the student had created an avatar, there were a number of verbal communication tools available to them. As discussed in Chapter 5, the following tools were used: text-based chat, voice-chat, IM’s and Notecards. In general, if compared to other online learning platforms, it can be said that virtual worlds present similar verbal communication tools and are not unique or significantly different in this sense. However, students in our course were, nevertheless, introduced to the use of these tools during the pre-course orientation sessions. Indeed, technical initiation of students is endorsed as being a fundamental stage in designing for participation in language learning in virtual worlds (Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a).

7.1.1 The representational dimension of avatars

For the purposes of this study, I have categorized the performative dimension of avatars as that which enables users to act in the environment as described in the previous section. With the term “representational dimension”, I refer to the relationship between avatars and the representation of self that is afforded by the platform. These distinctions
are based on a recent rereading of my previous publications (Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielesen, 2010) discussed in full in Chapter 3. The representational dimension of avatars as defined in this section is one of the main affordances of virtual worlds for education (e.g. Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; de Freitas et al. 2010; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Lim, 2009; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielesen, 2010). Through freely available tools and in-world objects, users can customise their appearance in very creative ways. In addition to appearance, the voice-morphing tool also allows users to modify their voice to the extent that it can become unrecognisable. However, data collected under the case study did not provide any specific information about the use of the representational dimension of avatars, neither from the point of view of self-expression nor in terms of how users reacted to the appearance of other avatars in our context. The lack of data about student affect in relation to avatar appearance clearly amounts to a limitation of this research project. This limitation will be discussed in Section 7.4.2.
Still 1/7 (L2R0M17.02) Students as animal avatars.

This still provides an example of how some of the students chose to be represented by animal avatars. Names have been removed and the name of the animal has been added for clarity.

However, despite the limitations in the data as to the impact on the learners of the use of avatars, some explicit student comments about the use of avatars and avatar appearance did occur in the first lesson during the introduction to the course as part of teacher-initiated conversations in the voice-chat.

For example, in Lesson 1, minute 01.11 of the recording (L1R1M01.11), the following student comment appears in the text-chat in reference to my remark to GM-E about how this was the first time I had had students as animals in Second Life and how I found this a pleasant experience.

[2011/10/27 07:26] HTE: amazing isn't it
Another example of this can be found in Lesson 1, in the text-chat sequence from minute 23.50 to minute 24.22 in the recording (LIR1M23.50-24.22). The text-chat lines which are relevant to avatar appearance have been highlighted in bold in the excerpt below. The other text-chat contributions by avatars are relevant to other parts of the conversation I was having with the students in the voice-chat and have been included here so as to provide the reader with the full context in which the comments appear in the original text-chat log. Additional context for the text-chat data can also be found in Clip 1 below in relation to my discussion of avatar appearance and verbal activity in the target language.

The first comment in the chat sequence below by HTE (don’t be afraid, i m cool) is a direct response to my comment in the voice-chat to one of the new students who have just entered the room to sit next to the dog on the sofa. The other text-chat comments about animals follow my comment in the voice-chat about the arrival of another student as a giant dog.

```
[2011/10/27 07:45] HTE: don´t be afraid, i m cool
[2011/10/27 07:46] HTE: another dooooggg
[2011/10/27 07:46] HTE: :D:D:D
[2011/10/27 07:46] HTE: dogs power
[2011/10/27 07:47] HTE: sitting like a man
[2011/10/27 07:47] konnyko: yes
[2011/10/27 07:47] HTE: le petit chaperon rouge in france
[2011/10/27 07:48] HTE: cute accent
[2011/10/27 07:48] FX: lets open an animal farm
[2011/10/27 07:48] HTE: not terrible, cute
[2011/10/27 07:48] FX: i should change my avatar to a horse or something
[2011/10/27 07:48] TZ: no i am a horse
[2011/10/27 07:49] HTE: we would be like a farm
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1 The appearance of symbols (i.e. ¬¥ and ¬Ψ) in some of the text-chat lines is a result of how the text-chat was saved in Second Life and transferred to a word document.
I would argue, thus, that these student comments - as they appear in the data - can be seen as contributing to the second stage of learner interactivity in virtual worlds defined by Salmon (2011) as socialisation through avatar appearance albeit rather limited within our context as already mentioned above.

**Clip 1 (L1R1M21.18-23.33)** Group discussion arising from the visual representation of a student avatar as a dog.

In this clip, the arrival of the student provides an opportunity for verbal activity and creates the context for target language use. The clip also demonstrates how I am picking up on what is being said in the text-chat and weaving it into what I am saying in the voice-chat in line with the pedagogical uses of text-chat as discussed in Deutschmann and Panichi (2009b) and Wigham (2012) in Chapter 6.
Still 2/7 (L6R1M33.52) Changed appearance of student.

The following still is an example of one of the students who changed her appearance in Lesson 6. The student had been a dog in the previous lessons (as seen in Still 1) but completed the course in a fancy dress.

The student on my left is the student who changed her appearance during the course. She finished the course with this appearance of a woman in a fancy gown. A point that can arguably be raised here is to what extent the change in avatar appearance illustrated in this example can amount to a change in participation as discussed by Deutschmann and Panichi (2009b) in Chapter 3 and Young and Miller (2004) in Chapter 2. Did the student feel that her new avatar was more appropriate to the learning aims of the course she was engaged with? Was it the result of her experience of the course? What was the
impact of this change in the discourse of learner participation within our context? However, there is no data under the project which captures this process as experienced by the learner or the teacher and which can provide information about the link between the student’s choice of avatar and learning. Limitations in the data in relation to the representational dimension of avatars will be addressed in Section 7.4.2.

7.1.2 Learner participation as avatar proximity and positioning

Avatars whose users are 18 and over are free to move to and from any location in Second Life without restriction. As far as the course was concerned, students spent nearly all of their course time within the specifically designed space for learning on the Talkademy island. Teleporting to other locations was one of the basic skills taught to the newly created avatar users as part of the course induction meetings. In this sense, upon course commencement student avatars possessed the necessary skills to come and go from the course location as they pleased and to use the virtual world for their own activities or purposes beyond the course. However, the data collected under this project does not provide information about how students used the virtual world independently of the course nor are there any examples in the data of students moving away from the activity areas during lessons. There were a few examples of students logging in and out of the platform during lessons as a result of technical issues. As far as the course was concerned, it can be argued that learners indicated participation in the course activities by being present with their avatars within the activity spaces at all times. Positioning of avatars in this sense is discussed as a proxemic act by Wigham and Chanier (2013) in Chapter 3. Proximity to the teacher and other avatars can be considered a prerequisite for participation as the reach of both the voice-chat and the text-chat is limited in the virtual world. For the voice-chat function to operate for communication among avatars, the avatars have to be sufficiently close to each other. In this sense, the virtual world simulates sound in f2f communication. In terms of the course design, this feature of the
voice-chat meant that all avatars would be close when group discussions were taking place and would move away or be at a distance from the other members of the group and the teacher for pair or group work. Through their individual avatars, users can choose where to go and where to position themselves at all times. As with all speaking devices including microphones in f2f communication, the device can be switched on or off or left open in talk mode according to the participants’ preferences and the type of activity being carried out. Students received no formal instructions about when to activate or not activate voice-chat. Still 1 and 2 above are also examples of how learner avatars positioned themselves in relation to the scenarios. In Clip 1, for example, the students deliberately clicked on the sofas and the rocking chair so that they were sitting facing the group. The following stills illustrate avatar proximity and positioning in relation to core course activities further.

**Still 3/7 (L5R3M31.51)** Avatars grouping in the Welcome Area at the end of a task.

This still shows how the avatars are positioned in relation to the activity that has just been carried out. Students are positioned so that they can view the whole group and can see where the boxes have been placed. The positioning of the avatars enables them to
take part in the conversation that is taking place and to relate to the outcome and language content of the game.

Still 4/7 (L4R5M16.55) Students standing in front of a game area rezzed in the Welcome Area.

Here the game is being explained to students. The group of avatars is positioned outside of the game area and so they can see what the game looks like. Claudio Whalen is explaining the game to the group and is positioned inside the game area facing the group.
Still 5/7 (L4R5M21.25) Students playing the game explained to them in Still 4.

Compared to the previous still (Still 4) where the students were depicted standing outside of the game area, here the all avatars are clustered within the game area in order to take part in the game.

Still 6/7 (L9R1M8.45) Students presenting to the group.
This presentation activity took place in the \textit{Welcome Area}. Students are positioned in a way that makes sense in relation to the task at hand. The students are presenting their work on a screen and are positioned so that they can see what is on the screen and are close enough to be able to hear what the others are saying and participate in the conversation. All avatars are facing the other members of the group.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that learner positioning displayed in the examples from the data illustrated above show a behavioural pattern. In all of the examples, student avatars are positioned in a way that is meaningful for their participation. In other words, it can be argued that learner participatory behaviour is consistent with the activity that is required of them. It would thus be fair to assume that there is a certain level of intentionality in the avatars’ behaviour. In short, the students are facing the audience because they have the technical tools to do so and have made a choice to do so.

\textbf{7.1.3 Participation as interaction for learning}

The use of avatars as the primary tool for interaction within the platform is arguably one of the most distinguishing features of virtual world platforms (e.g. Dalgarno and Lee, 2010; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Salmon, 2011; Schweinhorst, 2009). Not only is all verbal communication and movement performed via the user’s avatar, but it is also through the use of an avatar that the learner can view and interact with the environment. Interaction with the environment includes a whole host of possibilities according to the design (computer scripting) of each specific space. Examples of interaction with the environment include the opening of doors, the pressing of buttons, entering buildings, moving objects, giving and receiving objects from other avatars, taking snapshots and collaborative building. The sum of different types of interaction in which the learner engages in the virtual world (i.e. with the environment, its objects and other users) is discussed as interactivity in the pursuit of learning by Salmon (2011). Along similar
lines, interaction is presented as an opportunity for action in support of learning by van Lier (2004) in Chapter 2 and Zheng et al. (2009) in Chapter 3. As with the notion of proximity and positioning discussed above, for activity to amount to participation, however, I would like to suggest that it has to be both intentional and in relation to the task as illustrated in the examples below.
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Clip 2 from *The Sculpture Garden* activity (Lesson 1) shows examples of my teacher avatar interaction with the environment. As all recordings were carried out through my avatar, the recording is limited to my experience of the environment but it can be seen as representative of student avatar interaction as discussed in this section. This activity was followed up by a debriefing session where the students discussed their experience. This feedback session is illustrated in *Clip 6* further below. It is reasonable to assume that students’ interaction with the environment is intentional and deliberate insofar as interaction in this space is entirely dependent on student avatar keyboard commands.

Clip 2 (L1R1M36.00-43.00) Avatar interaction in the *Sculpture Garden*. 
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Stills 7 and 8 from *The Business Plan hexagon box* (Lesson 3) show how students placed cones on the triangle on the floor as a way of signalling the presentation they thought was worth developing further. The students had two cones each they could assign and they could assign one to their own project.

**Still 7/7** (L3R1M19.38) Students before placing cones.

The still is of students before they place the cones. There are no cones on the floor before the activity.
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Still 8/7 (L3R1M32.19) Coloured cones have been placed on the board by the students.

The comparison of Still 7 and 8 shows the beginning and end sequence of the task. Stills have been provided here rather than a clip of the activity as the recordings did not capture the students’ voice-chat due to technical problems. I was also limited in my own positioning as my avatar movements were kicking some of the cones by accident and interfering with student activity. In addition, there is a considerable amount of visual clutter in the recordings making it hard to understand what it going on compared to the stills.

Stills 9 and 10 from The Business Roles Board Game (Lesson 4) show how students positioned cubes onto a coloured board on the floor according to the activity to which the cube was referring. The 4 coloured squares on the ground represented a key area of business activity (Sales, Finance, Marketing, R&D). Each cube displayed a title describing a key business activity.
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Still 9/7 (L4R5M20.21) Positioning of boxes at the beginning of the activity.

Still 10/7 (L4R5M38.13) Still of boxes after they had been moved by students (approximately 18 minutes after Still 9 was taken).
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Stills 9 and 10 have been presented here instead of a recording as the visual clutter in the area made it difficult to see students moving the boxes in the recordings and hard to interpret what was going on.

Clip 3 from the Language reflection game (Lesson 6) scenario shows students organising cubes scattered on a game board listing key language items used in the different parts of business presentations. The rectangles contained the key structural elements of oral presentations (introduction, outline, purpose of the talk, the key idea, summarising, inviting questions).

Clip 3 (L6R1M23.49-26.18) Students moving boxes.
In the minute leading up to this recording I inform the students that they will have to move close up to the boxes in order to read the content before positioning them. The movement that can be observed in the clip is thus that that of students moving towards the cubes to read the content and then moving them to an appropriate area on the floor. In the final part, one of the students communicates in the text-chat that she is ready (meaning that she has completed the task) and moves out of the game board into a position from where she can view what she has done.

7.1.4 Learner participation as contextualised movement

In this section, I would like to suggest that, as well as being examples of avatar interaction with the environment, all of the above illustrations are also examples of avatar participation in games and scenarios in terms of contextualised movement. Here, as in the stills above, avatar movement is not random or casual as it is clearly related to the task at hand. Confirmation of the intentionality of the movement is often also provided in the text and voice-chat recordings that accompany the movements as illustrated in Clip 4 below, for example. As such, I would like to suggest that it is possible to interpret avatar movement as an intentional (participatory) act which is related to the student’s learning. The following data items are a further illustration of this.

In the Good Presentation Quiz scenario (Lesson 6), the aim was to get students to reflect and talk about the main features of a presentation within the course context. A screen was used to display slides with statements about presentations and the students then had to move into a green area if they agreed with the statement or into a red area if they disagreed with the statement. In designing this task, the aim had been to get students to reflect upon their learning and course content developed until then and to encourage student participation by getting them to use movement in the virtual world.
Clipping 4 (L6R1M42.39-47.09) Students moving in the green and red spaces of the *Good Presentation Quiz*.

As shown in the clip, the fact that learners had to make a choice and make this choice available visually led to specific questions being asked by the students as to meaning. As exemplified in the excerpt, each slide also led to a discussion around the topic. In this sense it can be argued that there is a connection between participation through contextualised movement, verbal interaction in the target language and course content.
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An example of the student’s intentionality in their choice of movement and positioning is at minute 00.57 of the recording (L6R1M00.57) while the slide “Keep it short” was still visible and before the next slide appeared. The student writes the following comment in the text-chat:

[2011/12/08 07:51] FX: no discussion ;)

This comment appears in the recording immediately after the teacher says in the voice-chat between minute 00.46 and 00.54 (L6R1M00.46-00.54) “Yep, ok. I think, yes, that we all agree that to keep is short is a good idea. Ok”. Thus, the fact that the student remains seated in the green area can be understood as intentional as it is supported by verbal agreement and is in line with the teacher-led interaction.

Another example can be found at minute 03.43 of the recording (L6R1M03.43), where the same student (FX) asks a question as to the meaning of the expression “To Learn by Heart” displayed on the third slide. The student asks the question while sitting in the green area. After receiving clarification from the teacher he moves into the red area several seconds later at minute 04.04 of the recording (L6R1M04.04). Clip 4 above is an excerpt of the first 5 minutes of this activity which lasted for a total of 30 minutes. This dynamic relationship between movement, verbal activity and course content is observable throughout the duration of the task and is an example of Wigham’s (2012) interplay between verbal and non-verbal activity in support of language learning. In addition, it can also be argued that learner participation as contextualised movement in this example is in line with a discussion of learner movement as a catalyst for participation as discussed by Deutschmann and Panichi (2009b) in Chapter 3.
In *The Second Life Business Quiz* scenario (Lesson 2), the students had to move into one of the coloured areas on the floor according to which answer they wished to give for each question.

**Clip 5** (L2R0M00.46-06.25) Avatar movement in the *Second Life Business Quiz*.

In this excerpt only my voice can be heard. My recording system did not pick up the voice-chat data from this lesson because of last minute changes to the recording set-up. However, all avatars were audible to me at the time and the dynamics of the activity can be understood by what I say in the recording, by what we all did and by the contributions by the other avatars in the text-chat. As the excerpt in *Clip 4* above, student avatars visually signalled their decisions and conversations were built around their movement in the space. The clip shows, through my own teacher avatar narrative
of what was going on, how it is also important for avatars to be positioned in such a way that they can read or see the information which is provided by the environment in terms of linguistic input. This excerpt is of approximately the first 7 minutes of the activity which lasted for a total of 18 minutes. As in the previous example illustrated in Clip 4, the interplay between movement, verbal activity and course content is constant for the duration of the activity. Finally, while this dynamic relationship is noted in particular in relation to these two examples, it is also observable in all of the data presented so far. These two examples have been selected as particularly representative as the games were specifically designed for participation as avatar movement in the environment rather than as interaction with objects as illustrated in some of the previous examples.

7.1.5 Scope of learner participation

This section will examine the scope of learner participation within the virtual world platform and provide specific examples of how it was enhanced by role-play, collaborative task design and the inclusion of resources and tools which were external to the virtual world platform. This section will also look at how the platform allowed for learner experience and exploration and provide a discussion of how these activities can be seen to have impacted on participation.

The course designed both role-play scenarios and games in an explicit attempt to build on the immersive nature of the environment as discussed in Chapter 1 and in line with our designer beliefs about learner participation as discussed in Chapter 5. The main role-playing activities were the business presentations which the students were able to carry out in an environment that depicted a business meeting room in Lesson 2 and Lesson 5. The different types of environments used in the course and the list of games and learning scenarios have been listed in Chapter 5 and will not be reviewed again here. However, data showing the continuity between the virtual world experience and
the end of course presentation by students is an illustration, in particular, of Salmon’s (2011) final step of interactivity in relation to learning within the virtual world where she states that virtual world activity creates a connection to a real world task. In this sense, it could also be argued that the virtual world, by allowing for greater scope for self-expression through activity than in f2f contexts, also plays a role in accompanying students from a previous state of being to a new state as suggested by Breen (2001a) or towards a reconstruction of self as suggested by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) in Chapter 2. In other words, the virtual world allows for learners to rehearse behaviour in relation to a specific knowledge base for use outside of the virtual world platform. This is also inline with Hrastinski’s (2008) understanding of participation as an activity which is not limited to what goes on within an online learning platform but also involves learner activity outside of the platform.

2 My Italics.
Still 11/7 (L9R1M2.07) Two students presenting their final business plan in Second Life.

The two students are standing so they can see what is on the presentation screen as they present and the audience. There are two other people sitting in the audience apart from me but which do not appear in this specific screenshot. I am sitting facing the students and can clearly see what they are doing and the slides on the screen.
Still 12/7 (L10R1M32.27) Student presenting her work in the Language Lab at Bielefeld and streamed to me via Skype.

Here the student is presenting the work she developed with the other student with whom she had presented in Lesson 9 and as shown in the still above. The student is in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld and is talking to fellow students and the lead teacher for Bielefeld (DB) who are all in the lab. Myself and GM-E are streamed in via Skype on a laptop which was positioned facing the presentation screen so that we could see the student presenting and the student could see us in Skype.
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Still 13/7 (L9R1M21.55) Student presenting his business plan in Second Life.

Here the student is presenting his business plan which he developed together with another student during the course but who was not able to attend the final session in-world. As in Still 11, the student is standing so he can turn and see both the screen and the audience. The audience is sitting in a circle and can see both the presenter and the screen.
Still 14/7 (L10R1M19.01 ca) Student presenting his business plan in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld and streamed to me via Skype.

In this still, the student is presenting the same presentation he had presented in the final lesson in Second Life and illustrated in the previous still. As was the case shown in Still 12 above, the student is in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld and is talking to fellow students and the lead teacher for Bielefeld (DB) who are all in the lab. Myself and GM-E are streamed in via Skype on a laptop which was positioned facing the presentation screen so that we could see the student presenting and the student could see us.

The data illustrated in Stills 11, 12, 13 and 14 also provide us with examples of student final individual presentations based on work carried out through a collaborative process. Jaldemark (2008) has suggested that students place value on being able to provide
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individual contributions in online collaborative learning setups. Although the final course evaluation conversation among teachers, students and support staff described in Chapter 5 (the Round Table) indicates that the course had been beneficial to the students’ language development in general, the data does not provide more specific information about the relationship between collective activity and individual contributions. What the general outcome of the Round Table conversations might suggest, however, is that students were able to make a call in relation to the authenticity of the experience. In other words, it can be argued that the tasks were perceived as being sufficiently authentic to allow for students to develop within their individual ZPD as discussed by van Lier (2004). Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen (2009) also highlight the role played by authenticity and the collaborative nature of the virtual world tasks in relation to learner participation.

An additional illustration of student collaboration in the virtual world platform is the joint writing activity from Lesson 7 and presented here is Still 15. Here students are communicating in the virtual world and are writing into a shared writing pad which has been streamed into the platform.

Still 15/7 (L7R1M29.06) A collaborative writing task.
In this still, the students can be seen sitting around the *Skytable* in a private area. The screen in the background of the still shows the students’ joint writing activity that they are carrying out in a shared document online.

Also connected to the concept of the scope of learner participation is the notion of *experiencing* (e.g. Lim, 2009). In *The Sculpture Garden* scenario (Lesson 1), for example, students were invited to explore the garden and to interact with the objects. This task has been presented above in *Clip 2*. At the end of the task, students reported back on their experience and in particular on how it made them feel. This debriefing experience is now illustrated in *Clip 6*.

**Clip 6 (L1R1M45.40-47.49) Debriefing about virtual world experience.**

In this clip the students’ voices were not recorded for the same technical reasons discussed in relation to *Clip 5* above but the gist of the conversation can be followed because I pick up and repeat a lot of what the students are saying both in the voice-chat...
and in the text-chat. This routine of picking up on what students are saying, repeating and building on it is something I take from my f2f practice. This clip is also an example of how I used the chat function in a way that is similar to how I use a whiteboard in a classroom, to highlight and repeat vocabulary and expressions that are relevant to the course and that are cropping up during the conversation. In addition, the students are also using both channels of text-chat and voice-chat as a way of contributing to the conversation. A similar use of the text-chat by students and teachers has also been noted in Wigham (2012) and Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen (2009). What is of interest here, however, is the interplay between the different channels of communication in support of learning. The clip is an excerpt of the first 2 minutes of this activity which lasted in total for about 15 minutes. The tail-end of this feedback session then led into a discussion of how business might use virtual worlds for marketing. In this sense, the experience of the virtual world is being used to feed directly into course content. As such, this clip is an illustration of what Salmon (2011) refers to as the final stage of learning and interactivity. According to Salmon (op. cit.), in this stage, learner development occurs through a process of reflecting based on personal experience within the virtual world and of relating it to real life. In our case, the real life task was the creation of a business plan which made use of the virtual world.

In addition to the above, during the course there were instances of links between the virtual world platform and external resources to the platform such as to the Internet as a search engine. Thus, the scope of the platform was extended to include external resources as well. The Internet resources were directly related to the activity at hand in the virtual world as illustrated in Still 16 and 17 below.

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3 My italics.
In *The Business Plan hexagon box* (Lesson 3) each student had a wall from which they could access the Internet. Information from the Internet searches fed into their business plan activity for this task.

**Still 16/7 (L3R1M0.03)** The Google search engine is streamed into Second Life.

Each wall has an Internet search page for students to work on individually. Students could thus bring in content from outside of the virtual world which was relevant to the task at hand.

In the *Business Plan Box Game* (Lesson 5) scenario, 6 key concepts of a business pitch are listed in squares on the floor in a rezzed space in the *Welcome Area*. These items were taken from a video the students had watched on their own for homework and which was also available to them to view a second time on a screen in a nearby area. The students were asked to write on special writing cubes about how their presentations addressed each of the issues highlighted in the video and place the cubes in the relevant square on the floor.
The game board is positioned close to the screen with the Youtube video for viewing by students.

Students were able to use the information from the video to support them in their participation in the game.

Finally, the literature discusses the potential of virtual worlds for exploration in relation to learning (e.g. Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009; 2013; Lim, 2009). In our specific course, the broader Second Life environment was only used for one specific information collection activity as homework in Lesson 1. For this task, students were encouraged to explore Second Life freely and were also given landmarks to locations where they would find information that was relevant to the task at hand. There is no data of the exploration process as student avatars carried out this activity outside of course time and when I was not present to record through my avatar. Data from this activity will be presented in Still 18 and discussed in relation to the sharing of content in Section 7.2.1 below.

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Still 17/7 (L5R3M11.07) The game board is positioned close to the screen with the Youtube video for viewing by students.

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4 My Italics.
7.1.6 Participation and learner agency

Several authors refer to the role of learner agency or self-determination in relation to a discussion of participation (e.g. Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001; Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Snyder, Panichi and Lindberg, 2010; van Lier, 2004). The description of the use of avatars by students in this first section has highlighted how interaction within the virtual world course was at all times determined by the student and as such can be deemed to be intentional. This is even more the case if one considers that the students were provided with all the necessary skills and virtual world knowledge for intentional action in the platform. In this sense, we can be seen as having provided students with the technical skills for them to be able to choose where they wanted to be in the space and the extent they wanted to take part in the activities.

An additional example of how students made use of the environment in autonomous ways is their avatar positioning in the final activity in Lesson 2. The aim of this activity was to get students to present to the group the snapshot they had taken of a virtual world environment as part of their homework. There was a screen for the display of student snapshots of the virtual world and a platform, a stand and a microphone for use by the presenter. However, despite teacher instructions to each student to take the stand during the presentation of the students’ work, no student took the stand and all students remained standing in a group to talk about their experiences of the virtual world. The slides were uploaded to the screen in turn by Talkademy support staff. This is an example of where students decided how they wanted to use the space independently of teacher instructions and differently to how we, as designers, envisioned it would be used.
Presentation stand rezzed for the activity remains empty and students stand and talk about their slides within the group facing the screen. This still is taken halfway through this activity while one of the students is presenting her snapshot of the virtual world as illustrated on the presentation screen in the space. The student (the cat on the left) is turned towards the screen so that she can see her slide she is describing to the group but does not go up onto the platform and stand behind the lectern that has been rezzed.

### 7.2 Learner participation through artefacts

This section will discuss learner participation in relation to the virtual world artefacts created for the course and used by the students. In particular it will discuss the sharing of experience, knowledge and content among course participants through public channels. Indeed, Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2010) discuss the importance of sharing as a way of building a learning community which is supportive of participation in virtual worlds. The most immediate way of sharing in virtual worlds is through the

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5 An artefact in this context is a 3D object created by a Second Life resident or user. In visual research artefacts include photographs, films, advertisements and cartoons, for example (Silverman, 2011).
use of the public text-chat and voice-chat. As discussed above in Section 7.1, verbal activity through these channels is made available publicly to other avatars in the vicinity. In contrast, for private communication between avatars, IM’s are generally used. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of how only a very limited number of IM’s were used in the course. In addition to the public chat functions, sharing of information and experience can take place in public spaces via the use of specific artefacts.

7.2.1 Participation as sharing of information and experience
Snapshots were used in Lesson 2 as prompts for students to talk about a Second Life experience. Via their avatars, students were able to take snapshots of some of the places they had visited as part of their homework from Lesson 1 where they were instructed to find examples of businesses which were using the virtual world of Second Life for marketing. As in the sharing of photos in an online space or in a f2f classroom, the pictures enabled students to document information and to share personal experiences from the virtual world. As such, this tool enabled students to contribute to the course content and discussions. This activity has been illustrated by Still 18 above. Another example of learners sharing experience is the feedback session in Lesson 1 following exploration of the Sculpture Garden and discussed and illustrated with Clip 6 in Section 7.1.5 on the Scope of Learner Participation. In addition, it can also be argued that both of these instances of sharing can also be seen as examples of what Salmon (2011) refers to as information exchange at the third level of learner interactivity in virtual worlds.

7.2.2 Learner linguistic contributions
In addition to verbal participation through public text and voice-chat, public display of learner contributions to the course in terms of language content and knowledge took place through the use of artefacts that allowed for students to contribute linguistically (graphically and in writing) to the environment through presentation screens and specially scripted artefacts. Learner participation through language use is discussed by
Breen (2001) and referred to as verbal activity by Wigham and Chanier (2013). However, in Wigham and Chanier (op. cit.), verbal activity is limited to text and voice-chat channels and does not include a description of linguistic activity as writing in the environment.

The presentation screens designed in this course are similar to presentation screens which are used in conference or lecture rooms for the presentation of slides or images to an audience. Files and slides can be uploaded to these screens and avatars in attendance can watch a presentation. The students used the screens for the presentation of their business plan and other work they carried out as part of the course. The presentation screens were used entirely in the public meeting place of the Talkademy island called the *Welcome Area*. Illustrations of the use of presentations screen have been given above in *Still 11* and *13*.

In the *Business Plan Box Game* scenario (Lesson 5), 6 key concepts of a business pitch were listed in 6 different squares on the floor. These items were taken from a video the students had watched on their own for homework and which was also available to them to view a second time on a screen in a nearby area as illustrated in *Still 17* above. The students were asked to write on special writing cubes about how their presentations addressed each of the issues highlighted in the video and to place the cubes in the relevant square on the floor. Students wrote on the cubes by clicking on them and entering text into a text-chat box. By the end of the activity, the cubes displayed all of the students’ comments organised by concept (box) making it easy to create a group discussion which brought together various issues that were relevant under each concept point. However, although the tool provided an efficient and effective way of collecting student comments on a similar topic in one place, there was a problem of visual clutter making it hard to read the students’ comments.
Still 19/7 (L5R3M24.30) Example of learner contributions in writing in red (1).

In *The Business Plan improvement board* scenario (Lesson 6), the students listed together with the teacher those areas of their presentations that still needed improving and which they thought they needed to work on. The board enabled a list to be assembled based on the comments of all students. The students and the teacher went back to the board at the end of the lesson and used the comments to reflect on the learners’ contributions to the lesson. The board enabled the student comments to remain as a permanent record which was visible throughout the lesson and which also
amounted to a group outcome or learner generated content to be referred back to by others at a later stage. This activity had been devised as a revision activity half way through the course and as a reflection opportunity for self-awareness of student progress.

Still 21/7 (L6R1M9.43) Board with no learner contributions at the beginning of the lesson.
Still 22/7 (L6R1M15.35) Students making contributions to the board at the beginning of the lesson.
Still 23/7 (L6R1M1.19.51) Students and teacher revisiting the board at the end of the lesson.

During our conversation in front of the board at the end of the lesson, we confirmed that we had covered all of the points that needed addressing during the lesson and which had been signalled at the beginning of the lesson.

### 7.2.3 Participation through the visualisation of learner intentions

The following examples illustrate how, through a combination of learner actions in the environment in relation to specific tasks, it is possible to discuss participation in relation to visualisation of learner intentions. In these examples, visualisation of the learners’ decisions, choices and understandings are made known to the other participants and are an integral part of the activity. I would like to suggest that, by being able to see what other avatars are communicating via their avatars, learners are able to take part in a
process of co-construction of knowledge which is discussed by Salmon (2011) as a fundamental step in a process of interactivity in relation to learning in virtual worlds.

In *The Second Life Business Quiz* (Lesson 2), students were required to move into a specific space as an indication of their intentions. This activity has been discussed above in Section 7.1.4 in relation to participation as contextualised movement and illustrated in *Clip 5*. This activity was used by me as the teacher to stimulate group discussion in relation to course content. By moving their avatars and standing in one of the 4 coloured areas, students’ answers to the question were publicly visible to all. Visualisation of avatar positioning was used to initiate the discussions. However, one might want to bear in mind that not all students may wish to make their opinions or knowledge available in such a direct and explicit way to fellow participants for reasons associated with anxiety within the classroom (e.g. Oxford, 2000). Furthermore, it could be argued that some students simply followed the cues provided by others rather than providing an answer which was truly genuine. However, there was no indication in the recordings of the lesson itself that this was the case. Finally, it needs to be noted that these concerns are not specific to the virtual world platform and can be considered relevant to f2f teaching contexts as well. For example, in the f2f classroom, raising hands is a typical way for students to indicate visually agreement or disagreement with a specific answer and the same affective considerations would apply. It is suggested by some (e.g. Peterson, 2011; 2012b; Schwienhorst, 2002) that a greater sense of anonymity afforded to the student by being represented via an avatar may lead to some learners becoming more active in the environment compared to f2f contexts. This is in line with a comment made by one of the students in the end of course *Round Table* and discussed in Chapter 5. The student said that they felt more protected in the virtual world platform and, because they could not see the faces of those they were presenting

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6 The pronoun “they” is used here to refer to a single student without providing information as to the gender of the student so as to limit recognition in the data. There were only two students present in the *Round Table* in Lesson 10.
to as one would in a f2f presentation, they felt less inhibited in their presentation and less scared of making mistakes. However, this was not the case for the other student, for example, who expressed a preference for f2f delivery. Finally, however, the extent to which the virtual world platform can be seen as providing greater learner perceived anonymity and feeling of comfort is limited in this study as the students already knew each other from f2f contexts and most of the in-world interactions took place via computers in a shared laboratory space. As such, the students knew at least who the avatar students were from f2f contact with them.

*The Business Plan hexagon box* (Lesson 3) was used for the development of the students’ initial business plan ideas. This scenario has been discussed above in relation to learner interaction in Section 7.1.3 and illustrated in *Stills 7* and *8* and in relation to the scope of learner participation in Section 7.1.5 and illustrated in *Still 16*. As in the task above, this task allowed for the outcome of the task and for student decisions to be visualised by the number of cones in each triangle. The public display of those ideas which were most popular was used to initiate discussions around which ideas were worth developing further and how each student felt they could contribute. As a teacher, however, I did not personally like this space and made this known in the design conversations with KH and in the teacher reflections in Chapter 5. The space made me feel claustrophobic and it was visually cluttered making the reading of content difficult. It is not possible to establish to what extent my preferences and levels of comfort impacted on my participation in the task as a teacher neither did we collect data about this specific scenario in such terms from the students.
7.2.4 Visualisation of understanding and learning

The data also presents examples of how the environment was used to visualise learners’ understanding of course content and learning as a result of joint processes of knowledge construction in line with Stage 4 of Salmon’s (2011) model of learning in virtual worlds also mentioned in the previous section in relation to the visualisation of learner intentions. In addition, the examples discussed in this section will show how the visualisation of understanding was used as course content and made up the basis for group discussions. In other words, learner interaction in the environment was used both as a way of capturing individual learner understandings and as a way of developing knowledge for all students and fed, as such, directly into the creation of course content. In this sense, participation and learning cannot be clearly distinguished from each other and can be understood as parts of the same process. This echoes specifically Hrastinski’s (2008) and Salmon’s (2011) call for participation as a theory of learning as discussed in Chapter 3.

An example of visualisation of understanding and learning can be taken from the data from *The Business Roles Board Game* (Lesson 4) discussed above Section 7.1.2 in relation to avatar positioning and illustrated in Still 4 and 5 and in Section 7.1.3 in relation to learner interaction and illustrated in Still 9 and 10. The activity was a last minute adaptation of another scenario and we encountered several problems during implementation which are highlighted in my teacher reflections in the course description in Chapter 5. These concerns included the fact that some of the writing on the cubes was hard to read as it was too small and overlapped with other writing and the fact that not all students were proficient enough in Business Studies to understand the topical areas and activities presented in the game. Students indicated their lack of participation in the game by sitting on the nearby wall and observing those students who were more able to provide relevant content and move the cubes. However, it can be
argued that their lack of participation in the game in terms of the positioning of the cubes did not necessarily indicate lack of participation in the lesson in general nor any lack of learning.

Still 24/7 (L4R5M37.30 ca) Two student avatars sitting on the wall (on the left).

As mentioned in the teacher reflections in Lesson 4 and discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.5, I would like to point out that the overt lack of participation within the space of the board game indicated by some students was essentially due to the fact that the design of the task was not in line with the knowledge base of all the students. In this sense, it can be argued that the different degrees of learner participation displayed in the carrying out of this task had nothing to do with the virtual world medium *per se*. The lack of student participation in this instance can be ascribed to a mismatch between the task design and learners’ level of target language knowledge. However, as already discussed in Chapter 5, my overall assessment of the scenario from the point of view of teaching was positive as, by the end of the activity, students had come up with good questions, relevant content and new understandings and this information was shared across the group. Indeed, it can be argued that the less active students did however benefit from the participation of others as suggested by Breen (2001c). In addition, the data excerpt in
Still 24 above also illustrates the distinction between task and learner activity as discussed in Lantolf (2000a). Indeed, the fact that the students were not participating in the game does not mean they were not participating in the learning experience nor that learning was not taking place. The case for a different interpretation could have been made, of course, if the students had logged out of the virtual world platform all together or moved away from the area to a space where they could not hear what was going on. Another final example of visualisation of learning as both an outcome and a prompt is to be found in the data from the Language reflection game (Lesson 6) already discussed in Section 7.1.3 in relation to learner interaction for learning and illustrated in Clip 4.

7.3 Transient participatory spaces

As discussed in Chapter 3, Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi (2009) illustrate how educational spaces in virtual worlds can be understood as “transient spaces”. According to this understanding, virtual worlds can be modified so that they can visually represent different types of learning spaces and allow for a variety of educational experiences. In addition, in her discussion of participation and affect in language learning, Arnold (2000) discusses the role of visualisation and its impact on learner affect and participation in language learning. In our course, the Welcome Area is an example of how the spaces were used to accommodate the different participatory modes of the course. This space was used in all of the virtual world lessons. The “Welcome Area” was the term used by Talkademy to refer to this space on their island. It was generally the first meeting space we assembled at on the Talkademy educational island in Second Life. It was also used for debriefing sessions after activities or specific tasks and for some of the student presentations. It is an open space where screens for presentations or other tools and games can be rezzed. The area leads onto other areas or stages that were used during the course. It is also the area where the Sky Tables are located for group and pair-work. The space appears as an open space which is easy for
avatars to move around in. It is also a space from where it is easy to “see” and identify access to the other adjacent stages and learning areas. As discussed in Chapter 5, it has been found useful by virtual world teachers and educational designers in virtual worlds to make spaces such as welcome areas easy for new users to navigate and move around in. Limiting the objects (builds)\(^7\) in the area and keeping it uncluttered makes it easy for newcomers to move around and see where they need to go. The *Welcome Area* was a place where the students and the teachers would meet and some of the main activities carried out. In addition, it was also a “transient” space in the sense that it often acted as the space where students and teachers would meet and gather on their way to or way back from another area or stage. In short, the *Welcome Area* is a multipurpose space. It was open, easy to navigate and to adapt.

**Still 25/7** (L4R4M21.59) *Welcome Area* on the Talkademy island.

![Image of Welcome Area on Talkademy island](image)

The space leads to an activity space or “stage” on the left. The *Sky Tables* are positioned at one end. The empty space on the right was used to rezz many of the course games as was the space behind my avatar which is not visible in this still.

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\(^7\) “Build” is the term used in Second Life to refer to a virtual world object that has been built.
There are also a number of stools or poufs for sitting on in the Welcome Area. These were used and placed in a circle for class discussions and debriefing sessions at the end of some of the tasks. It can be argued that the informal seating arrangements and the communal space set the scene for the course.

Still 26/7 (L2R0M1.16.57) Poufs in the Welcome Area.

In addition to the Welcome Area, a variety of other spaces were used as illustrated in Chapter 5. These included informal conversational spaces such as the Team Room (aka the Blue Sofa Sitting Room because of the blue sofas), more formal looking spaces such as the Business Meeting Room, and private spaces such as the SkyTables. However, the data does not provide any information about the students’ perceptions of these spaces and how this might have impacted on their participation and, as such, constitutes a limitation of this research project. This limitation is discussed in Section 7.4.3.

7.4 Discussion of outcomes

This section will summarise the analysis of learner participation provided above and critically review the use of the virtual world in relation to the rationale for our design decisions and the limitations of the information provided by the data. In particular, this section will look at our role as designers and teachers in the shaping of learner participation. This section will conclude with a discussion of ways in which designer participation can also be visualised in the platform.
7.4.1 Access and intention to participate

From the analysis above, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the students possessed the basic technological knowledge and skills to participate in all tasks of the course to their advantage (for learning) through their avatars. As already mentioned in the Chapter 5, students were provided with compulsory induction tutorials prior to course commencement and with ongoing support both in the Language Lab at the University of Bielefeld and online by Talkademy support staff throughout the course. In addition, the general feedback from the design team and the support staff upon course completion was that, compared to other courses we had all been involved in, this course had run particularly smoothly in terms of technology thus contributing positively to the general flow of the course.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the students also possessed the necessary skills to use the virtual world independently of the course. However, the data collected did not provide information about the students’ use of the environment outside of course requirements as the focus of the Exploratory Practice driven research discussed in Chapter 4 is on learner activity and experience within the course framework. Last but not least, it needs to be noted that, as far as their participation and attendance in the course was concerned, the students were not obliged in anyway to stay on the Talkademy island if they did not wish to do so during course time. It was also in their power to move away from the group and not participate in activities if they did not wish to. Future research may want to investigate the extent to which learners are prepared to explore the platform beyond specific course requirements in an attempt to gain a better understanding of their experience of the platform. Finally, if we are to interpret learner participation in relation to a discussion of self-determination and agency as illustrated in section 7.1.6, it can be argued that the fact that students possessed the technical skills to move away from the course area and activities and chose not to do so can be taken as an
indication of intentionality to participate in the course at least to the extent of engagement as discussed by Norton (2001) in Chapter 2, for example. In other words, while students were not asked directly about their actions within this research project, it is reasonable to assume that to the extent that learner activity was observed within the data set, it was at least intentional. Building on the discussion in Chapter 3 of Chun (2004), Fitze (2006), Lamy (2004), Peterson (2010), Chanier and Wigham (2013), Deutschmann and Panichi (2009a), I would thus like to suggest an understanding of communicative competence\(^8\) in online language learning that includes avatar technical skills. In addition, I would like to propose to extend the understanding of online communication\(^9\) in CMCL as discussed, for example, by Ciekanski and Chanier (2008), Lamy (2004), Lamy and Hampel (2007) in Chapter 3 to include intentional avatar movement and interaction within a 3D environment.\(^{10}\)

### 7.4.2 The representational dimension of avatars

Despite a clear indication in the literature of the potential for self-expression in relation to learning via the use of avatars (e.g. Deutschmann and Panichi 2009a; Lim, 2006; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Schweinhorst 2009), practically no data around the use of the representational dimension of avatars was generated under this project other than learners’ choice of avatars used for participation in the course as it manifested itself in the visual data. As discussed in Chapter 5, during the induction sessions with students, students were supported in the process of creating their avatars. At the time of the running of this course, newcomers to the virtual world platform of Second Life were presented with a range of standard default avatars which included a selection of anthropomorphic avatars, animals and monster-like creatures among which they could choose. Data from the project, however, does not provide information about this selection process and the extent to which students were aware of the fact that they

\(^{8}\) My Italics
\(^{9}\) My Italics.
\(^{10}\) My Italics.
could modify and customise their avatars at a later stage. In addition, the data also fails to provide any explicit information about how the students felt about their avatars and the extent to which their representation of self or the appearance of other avatars might have impacted on their participation in the course. Finally, the course syllabus did not provide for any explicit use of avatar appearance and identity.

In attempting to explain why we, as course designers, did not capitalise on this dimension of avatars, two main considerations can be made. The first, as discussed in Chapter 5, is based on the fact that the main focus of the course was on enabling students to use the virtual worlds for learning activities and simulations which were directly connected to their end of course task of presenting their business plan in class outside of the virtual world platform. In this sense, it can be argued that, our teaching focus led to us placing less importance on the representational dimension than on other affordances of the environment such as the gaming affordances and role-play possibilities (i.e. the performative dimension). Secondly, I would also argue that, as experienced teachers and designers in the medium, we had somehow developed a certain level of complacency about several aspects of the environment. It was as if, because we were totally familiar with the immersive potential of the environment and convinced of the expressive dimension of avatars, we felt no need to address this dimension explicitly in our course design. This was particularly the case where to do so meant taking away time and energy from our main educational focus at the time which, as discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.7, was on learner participation as interaction (learning by doing and target language use). In other words, as designers and developers, our focus was on those issues which were most urgent to us at the time as part of our own learning. Furthermore, the EP approach, as discussed in Chapter 4, clearly highlights the importance of finding answers to puzzles that arise as part of one’s practice. From the discussion above, it would appear that the immersive nature of
the environment was not a puzzle to us and we were thus not interested in developing our understanding about it at that specific point in time. That is not to say that it is not a worthwhile field of investigation for research and that it is not relevant to a discussion of learner participation in virtual worlds.

Despite the limited use of the representational and expressive dimension of avatars, the course did provide opportunity for learners to experience the performatative dimension through the presentation role-play scenarios as discussed in section 7.1.5 on the Scope of Learner Participation. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.3, the general virtual world educational literature has highlighted the relationship between role-play and games and the immersive dimension of virtual worlds (e.g. Dalgarno et al., 2013; de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010; Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; 2013; Harasim, 2012; Jæger and Helgheim, 2009; Lim, 2009; Moschini, 2010). Role-play and games are also key activities around which a lot of materials in the communicative approach to language teaching are traditionally organised as illustrated in some of the most common EFL text-books. However, in f2f language classrooms in higher education, there is often less scope for role-play as we are limited by space and constrained in our mental landscapes by what we can see or visualise (cf. Arnold, 2000). In this sense I would like to suggest that the combined visual and interactive dimension of virtual worlds are capable of extending the scope and increasing contextual information of role-plays thus making the learning experience more immersive and thus more powerful than similar tasks carried out f2f. In addition, when compared to f2f contexts, it can be argued that the virtual world provides learners with greater scope for simulation than in traditional language learning classrooms. An example of this is the playing of “Hide and Seek”\textsuperscript{11} which is generally not feasible in university teaching rooms or the carrying out of scientific experiments as in the case of the Swift project (Salmon, 2011; 81-86).

\textsuperscript{11} This is a learning scenario I experimented with during the development phase of WP2 of the Avalon project.
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However, as far as this research project was concerned, data was not forthcoming about the extent to which the learners felt that the immersive nature of the environment contributed to their experience of learning.

7.4.3 Motivation, presence and quality of experience

As discussed in Chapter 3, the literature clearly lists learners’ sense of presence as relevant to a discussion of participation in virtual worlds (Leong, 2011; Lim, 2009; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Schweinhorst, 2004; 2009). However, the data collected does not provide information about student perceptions of their avatars or of the relationship between the affective dimension of learning and representation via avatars for reasons discussed in the previous section, i.e. it was not a focus of our learning as course designers and developers. It can be assumed that learners’ experience of the course was at least satisfactory to the extent that it provided them with the motivation necessary to complete the course. However, future investigations may want to examine the role of avatars in terms of their performative and representational potential more explicitly with students in an attempt to determine how this dimension may impact on learner participation in terms of motivation, presence and quality of experience as discussed by Snyder, Panichi and Lindberg (2010) in Chapter 3. Future investigations may want to take a look at learner preferences in terms of the visual impact of the environment and how this impacts on their learning more specifically. Did the learners feel comfortable in the Blue Sofa Sitting Room? Did they feel that the Business Meeting Room contributed to the feeling of being immersed? How did they perceive this to impact on their learning? Finally, from a research methodology perspective, it needs to be underlined how, within this research project at least, what the learner could actually see can only be determined through the recordings of what my researcher/teacher avatar could see and that each student avatar would be perceiving the environment from their own unique perspective. As suggested in Chapter
6, future research may want to combine information about the impact of the environment through multiple avatar perspectives (*cf.* Moschini, 2010).

### 7.4.4 Learner participation as contextualised avatar activity

The data presented and discussed in the analysis section has provided detailed examples of the extent of learner contributions to the course in terms of both verbal and non-verbal activity and with reference to the course tasks and learning scenarios. We have seen, in particular, instances of activity as movement, positioning, interaction, sharing, experiencing, role-play, games, public and private conversations, learner contributions in writing to the environment and how these have been shaped and contextualised by the specific tool or scenario. From the illustration of the scenarios in Chapter 5 and the analysis above, I would argue that the main function of the scenarios designed for this course was to expand the scope for interaction by providing increased actional and visual contextualisation for learner interaction through immersion. I would thus like to argue for an understanding of participation that builds on the types of interaction in online learning listed by Bento and Schuster (2003) in Chapter 3 to include *avatar interaction with virtual world artefacts*[^12] as one of the possible forms of interaction in online learning. Similarly, a case can be made to expand on the understanding of participation discussed in detail by Hrastinski (2007) and Fitze (2006), for example, as reading and writing to include *avatar movement in context*.[^13] Finally, if we are to relate the discussion of participation as intentional and contextualised avatar activity to Breen’s (2001) discussion of overt participation, we can claim that the manifestation of learner verbal and non-verbal activity as discussed within this chapter can be seen as a form of “overt participation” that contributes to the discourse of the virtual-world classroom.

[^12]: My Italics.
[^13]: My Italics.
7.4.5 Limited use of the openness of Second Life

The openness of the virtual world is presented in the literature as one of the key affordances for language learning (Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010). However, compared to other language learning courses which make use of the broader context of Second Life such as the Italian for Beginners course developed under the Avalon project (Avalon, nd.a), our course made limited use of this affordance. Only one of our tasks encouraged exploration of the virtual world and no tasks were designed to encourage learners to interact with other residents of Second Life beyond the course framework. The reasons for this decision are not forthcoming from the data collected under this research project and are probably to be found in decisions made prior to the running of this specific course. As already mentioned in Chapter 5, the Talkademy Business English Course had been run several times in the past and with different teachers. As such, even though I had been invited to join the design team with a clear mandate to change whatever I thought needed changing, I was, nevertheless, working with an existing structure of the virtual world educational practices of the Talkademy design team. Follow-up conversations with Talkademy have since confirmed that the choice of an open platform such as Second Life compared to more closed platforms such as OpenSimulator were based on Talkademy staff members’ personal experience of working with the specific platform and in particular the wish to use its building features. In this sense, the initial decision to use Second Life had been based on its building features and not on the extent to which was an open or closed environment. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.7, the design conversations reveal how Talkademy was making use of the Business English course to explore the development of gaming scenarios in

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14 OpenSimulator is a platform in which administrators and teachers may exercise greater control over user/student access and freedom of movement within the environment. In OpenSimulator, students can only access the specific learning space that has been allocated to them making it a platform of choice when working with underage learners or when there is a requirement that access to the platform be controlled exclusively by the educational provider.
teacher independent ways in particular. In short, it may have been the case that the openness of Second Life was not fully exploited in the initial design of the Business English course simply because the main focus at the time the platform was chosen was on building an appropriate environment rather than exploring the existing environment. Furthermore, there is certainly no technical reason why future courses of Business English cannot develop in this direction and make greater use of the platform. Finally, as with the discussion of the limited use of the representational dimension of the virtual world platform in Section 7.4.2, the limited use of the openness of the environment is an example of how our needs as designers shaped the development of the course.

Indeed, Talkademy have since made use of the broader virtual world in a course of *German for Beginners* (Euroversity, 2012). On this course, learners of German are taken on an exploration of virtual world locations where either German is commonly spoken or objects and environments which reflect German culture and history are to be found. Another example of designers capitalizing on the openness of the environment for language learning is the *North Sami for Beginners* course as it was developed under the Avalon project (Avalon, nd.b) where the learners of the North Sami heritage language are given tasks to explore the in-world environment of another heritage language.

In addition to the above, it could be argued that we took advantage of the openness of the platform to the extent that we invited experts from the broader virtual-world community. However, any online learning platform can allow for invited guests to be in attendance and it cannot be considered a specific characteristic of the virtual world. What may be of interest is how, through their presence as avatars, the guests may have had an impact on the environment visually and thus played a role, together with their expert contributions, in creating a more immersive experience for learners compared to other online learning platforms. However, this information was not collected under this
research project. It may be that future research compares learner experience of contributions from experts across different platforms to establish whether in-world presentations or contributions create greater impact in terms of quality of experience, for example. Lack of student data surrounding the openness of the environment does indeed constitute a limitation of this research project.

### 7.4.6 Visualisation of participation

As we have seen in the analysis of this chapter, there are several ways in which learner participation can be visualised in the virtual world. One way is through the capture of target language use via the standard communication channels such as text-chat. Another way of visualising learner participation as we have seen in several of the tasks discussed in the analysis section is to use tools that allow written content produced by the students to remain in the environment and to be displayed via the tool that has been used for the creation of the content. Examples of this are the presentation boards in the *Welcome Area* and the writing outcomes of some of the games. Other examples of how content can be stored and shared beyond the time in which it was produced is the use of snapshots as discussed in the analysis above. In addition, the snapshots can also be exported from the virtual world thus providing visual documentation just as a photograph would. In particular, however, the analysis provides a number of examples of participation through non-verbal activity such as deliberate and contextualised avatar movement, interaction and positioning. Caution, however, needs to be exercised when attempting to interpret student participation through avatars as several intervening factors such as the users’ virtual world skills, the specific learning context and the environment might also come into play. An example of this is avatar scripting whereby avatars who stand or sit in a specific space will appear in a certain way which is beyond the control of the user. Future research may want to consider the use of think-aloud protocols as a way of capturing the learner’s experience of their interaction in the virtual
world and the extent to which they have control over their non-verbal activity and the extent to which it can thus be considered intentional. If we wanted to take this an additional step forward, instead of think-aloud protocols, it might be that future set-ups may want to attempt to capture data about participant parallel out-of-world activity. This could be achieved by video-recording student activity while sitting at a computer and interacting in the virtual world as suggested by Macintyre, (2008) or, more generally, by investigating learner activity offline as suggested by Hrastinski (2008).

This use of the virtual world to produce, capture and render semi-permanent student written content is similar to the use of saving or collecting learner builds or 3D objects that avatars have built in the virtual world for ongoing or permanent display. Indeed, many spaces in virtual worlds provide users with specific areas for the building and displaying of user produced content. This affordance of the virtual world is particularly useful in online courses where students are required to produce joint builds such as in the fields of architecture and digital design (e.g. Molka-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009; Wigham and Chanier, 2013). Like snapshots, builds can be exported out of the virtual world and be used to represent learner contributions in other contexts. Similarly, it can be argued that the virtual world builds of designers and teachers can be stored and analysed as artefacts. For example, in our specific case, there is no technical reason why, in virtual worlds, group discussion and reflections on learning need to be carried out while “sitting in a circle” as captured in Still 26. Based on my first hand experience of the events, I can say that, as a teacher, it is certainly easier to be able to focus on what students are saying while not moving around in the environment as this involves using controls and engaging in more than one activity at the same time. From a design point of view, I would argue that there has been clearly a tendency on our behalf as designers to replicate our understanding of teaching and learning visually within the environment. Further research may want to investigate how learners experience the individual
Chapter 7 – Learner Participation

artefacts created by the designers and the extent to which designers are aware of the full implications of their design in relation to learner participation. It is in this sense that the case may be made for an understanding of learner participation as the collective product of teachers and learners as discussed by Breen (2001) in Chapter 2 and Hall (2002) in Chapter 4.

Finally, in our course, there have been examples of a variety of settings which were specifically designed to look a certain way: open, closed, public, private, communal, task specific, formal, informal, etc. Indeed, the choice and design of the settings can be considered to visually represent our understandings as designers of how the virtual world environment can be used for the learning of Business English. However, in line with discussion around the conceptualisation of participation within CLT as discussed by Holliday (1997) and Sullivan (2000) in Chapter 2 and within the discussion of individual conceptualisations of spaces for learning in Panichi, Deutschmann and Molk-Melch-Johansen (2010) in Chapter 3, future research may also want to look at the extent to which the virtual-world learning environment and task design reflects culturally specific understandings of teaching and learning and to establish their relationship to learner participation across cultural contexts. Research along these lines would also address the argument made by Schwienhorst (2009) that, to a certain extent, we are limited in our use of virtual worlds by our mental constructs.

Caution also needs to be exercised when analysing artefacts created by course designers and relating them to designer beliefs about teaching and learning. It maybe that the artefacts are determined by a number of contextual constraints such as the designer’s building skills, the resources (time and money) at their disposal and the mandate or aim of the learning and teaching event. To conclude, I would like to argue that virtual worlds do provide ample amounts of visual and contextual information about participation in relation to both the learner and the teacher which can be used by
researchers in a number of ways. However, as with all qualitative research, interpretation and contextualisation are always required when using visual data for research purposes (Mason, 2002; Silvermann, 2011).

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how participation manifests itself within a virtual world platform in relation to the data collected within my Case Study. I have provided examples of how the use of the platform can support or limit certain manifestations of participation. I start my analysis with an illustration of avatar interactive and communicative features in relation to both verbal and non-verbal communication channels. I then examine avatar positioning and proximity as intentional movement. Indeed, by attempting to explain the extent to which learners possess the skills necessary to navigate the environment for the tasks required, I make a direct connection in my discussion between this skill set and learner intentionality. My argument is based on the reasoning that, if avatar users know how to use the virtual world to the extent that they are required to do so by the task at hand and they do interact with the environment accordingly, this interaction can be deemed to be intentional. Building on an understanding of avatar movement as an intentional act, I then go on to explain the nature of avatar interaction as a deliberate and purposeful act in relation to learning within the context (contextualised movement). My analysis proceeds with a discussion of the scope of avatar interaction within this context and in relation, more specifically, to out-of-world\(^\text{15}\) tasks and content, in-world collaboration, individual contributions, experiencing and exploration. I bring together the strands of this initial section with a discussion of learner agency in relation to avatar activity.

In the second section I look at learner activity in relation to the virtual world artefacts designed for the course. Here I make the case for participation as the sharing of

\(^{15}\)“Out-of-world” is an expression some of us use in the virtual world educational community to mean “non-virtual world”. The expression contrasts with “in-world” which means “in the virtual world.”
experience and linguistic contributions to the environment. More specifically, I identify the role played by the visualisation of learner intentions and understanding in the co-construction of knowledge and learning. In the third section I look at some of the implications of the visual impact of the environment on learner participation.

Finally, I have identified several issues that may shape the nature of participation presented in this chapter as contextualised and intentional interaction in support of learning. These include the choice of the virtual world by the course designers, the learners’ virtual world skills, the appropriateness of the tasks that have been designed in relation to students’ language learning, the type and scope of interaction that is available to learners either through the features of the virtual world or in relation to the tasks that have been designed. Last but not least, teacher beliefs about teaching and learning and about the affordances of the virtual world platform for education have also been listed as being relevant to a discussion of learner participation in virtual worlds.
Chapter 8 Conclusions, limitations and future research

Learner participation in language learning in virtual worlds can be understood as target language use and intentional and contextualised non-verbal activity in support of learning.

8.0 Introduction

This final chapter will first provide a summary of the findings of this research project in relation to the initial research question. Secondly, it will discuss the contribution of my PhD to the research field. Thirdly, it will discuss the limitations of the research project and context. It will then provide a list of recommendations for future practice and course design and will relate the outcomes to the Good Practice Framework of the Euroversity Network project. Finally, a summary will be provided of future research directions and approaches based on the discussion in Chapter 7 and the outcomes of the research project as a whole.

8.1 A definition of learner participation

As stated in Chapter 1, the aim of this PhD was primarily exploratory in nature and was based on limitations I had observed in the literature in 2010. As with all exploratory research, it is not possible to predict what the outcomes of the research journey will be because one does not know what one will find. In this sense, I have seen my exploration as a form of overturning rocks along the way. However, as stated by Yin (2009: 37), even exploratory case studies need some way of establishing how to determine when you have got there, though one may also argue that when exploration is concerned, this may not be easy to determine. In my case, I see this as having gone beyond existing understandings by providing a new way of thinking about participation in virtual worlds.
Chapter 8 – Conclusions, limitations and future research

The results of this PhD are to be found in the description and analysis of learner participation provided in Chapter 7. This description has led to the formulation of the following definition of learner participation in response to my research questions:

Learner participation in language learning in virtual worlds can be understood as target language use and intentional and contextualised non-verbal activity in support of learning.

While Chapter 7 has placed the emphasis primarily on intentional and contextualised learner non-verbal activity as this was an unexplored dimension of learner participation at the outset of my PhD, the understanding that verbal activity needs to be intentional and related to the task can also be implied. While it is, nevertheless, hard to think of verbal activity within a virtual-world platform that is not intentional, in language learning contexts the use of the target language - even if not related to the task - can be seen as beneficial to the students’ learning from other perspectives (i.e. fluency development) and as language practice, especially at lower levels. Indeed, it could be argued from a broader perspective that all target language use in the foreign or second language classroom or learning context is related to learning. Future research, however, may want to look at the extent to which the definition of learner non-verbal activity provided in this thesis can be applied to verbal activity as well and to online learner interaction in other platforms in general.

8.2 Additional outcomes

An additional outcome of this research project has been the opening up of the multimodal data collected under this research project to a reading in terms of the visual (what can be seen) enabling us to begin to understand participation in CMCL visually as well as linguistically. While it can be argued that all f2f interaction in the classroom can
be interpreted or understood visually (e.g. Jewitt et al., 2001), I would suggest that the virtual world platform, compared to non-graphic online learning platforms such as video-conferencing or to non-immersive platforms such as audiographic conferencing systems, allows for a more powerful visualisation of the dynamics of teaching and learning. This “power” of virtual worlds to represent visually human activity is in line with a discussion of the amplifying effect of the virtual world platform as discussed by Wang, Deutschmann and Steinvall (2013) and with Martin’s (2013b) comparison between virtual worlds and other forms of representational media such as film or the performing arts.

A final research outcome that flows from this research project is the illustration of how virtual worlds can be used as a research tool not only in terms of data generation and collection but also for reflection about educational practices through the visualisation of these practices as discussed in Chapter 4.

8.3 The contribution of my research outcomes

In responding to the call for more multimodal research within CMCL (e.g. Flewitt et al., 2009; 2013; Lamy; 2004; Lamy and Hampel, 2007), this PhD set out to explore whether there were other ways of looking at learner participation in virtual worlds that went beyond an analysis of linguistic data. As a result, this PhD is the first contribution in the field of CMCL to a discussion of language learner participation in virtual worlds based on visualisation (i.e. Mason, 2002) as the key analytical tool. As such, this PhD not only addresses the observed bias in the research literature towards linguistic data as discussed in Chapter 1, but it also provides new insight into how learner participation can be conceptualised in general. It contributes to the discussion of online communication within CMCL as discussed in Chapter 3 by adding avatar movement to the list of ways learners may participate within online learning platforms. As far as the general online literature is concerned, this PhD confirms the need expressed by Bento
and Schuster (2003) for learner participation to be related to course content and provides examples of how this is achieved through avatar movement. It adds to the discussion of participation in general as discussed in Chapter 1 by suggesting that we think about learner interaction in the language classroom not only in terms of target language use but in terms of learner activity more generally and addresses Breen’s (2001) call specifically for the need to increase our understanding of classroom discourse in general.

In addition to the above, in providing a definition of learner participation as verbal and intentional and contextualised non-verbal activity, this PhD is in line with Wigham’s recent (2012) distinction between verbal and non-verbal interaction in virtual worlds in support of verbal participation and production in a foreign language.\(^1\) The study makes use of a learner corpus based on a classification of verbal and non-verbal acts achieved through a discourse analysis approach. The similarity of our reciprocal findings is all the more significant as they have been reached by using different methodological approaches.

### 8.4 Limitations of the research framework and its findings

This research project has been limited by two main factors in particular. Firstly, as all single case studies, it was limited by the teaching and learning context of the Talkademy Business English Course and the data that was forthcoming from the specific context. Secondly, it was shaped by my general EP approach which limited the extent to which I was able to obtain information from the students outside of the course context as discussed in Chapter 4. It can be argued, nevertheless, that this methodological constraint led me to focus on and take a hard look at the virtual world data (Allwright’s “looking downwards” (2005: 359)) in order to find ways in which it could inform my PhD as it stood. The question that thus arises is whether I would have gone down the

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\(^1\) Findings from this study were first published internationally in Wigham and Chanier (2013).
road of visualisation as a research method at all without the limitation imposed upon me by EP and my data set. In this sense, it can be argued that what may appear to be a limitation on the one hand can also be seen as a strong methodological prong on the other.

In addition, I would like to suggest that while this research project may have been limited to a certain extent by its contextual and research constraints, it does, nevertheless, testify to the outcomes that can be achieved within the context of an EP approach to research. As such, my PhD is a response to the call by Allwright (2003) for the inclusion of EP research principles within the context of academic research and by Allwright and Hanks (2009) for more inclusive and principled Practitioner Research in general. This PhD thus provides an example of how the outcomes of a Practitioner Research project can be linked to the more general research debate by providing information not only about the particular context (in my case, the answering of my research puzzle) but also about learner participation which is relevant to other contexts as well (the answering of the research question). It can also be argued that Case Study research as discussed in Chapter 4 has a similar double role. On the one hand, the single case provides information about the case and the context while, on the other, it also contributes to theory building by linking its findings into broader contexts.

Finally, in view of my multiple roles as teacher, designer and researcher, there certainly was a case for a systematic approach to the discussion and framing of my actions as provided by EP. As far as the Talkademy Business English Course is concerned, the question that can be asked is to what extent the outcomes from this research project would have been different with another data set generated and collected under another course. Future research may, thus, want to do just that.
8.4.1 Exclusion of data about the affective dimension

The EP ethical approach to data generation and collection led to there being very little information about the affective dimension to learner participation. For example, there is no information about learners’ experience as feeling or belonging to a group as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 and as captured specifically by Hrastinski’s (2008) definition of online learner participation stated in Chapter 3. In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 7, data is also lacking on student affect in relation to avatar appearance (the Representational Dimension of Avatars) and on student affect in relation to the openness of the environment and the visual (for example, data about how students experience the different spaces). In this sense, the findings of my PhD feed into the general discussion around participation by adding to our understanding specifically of overt participation as defined by Breen (2001) while arguably neglecting those areas of less overt or observable participation. This limitation, however, can also be explained by the use of visualisation as the primary analytical tool. Indeed, when using visual analysis it is not possible to capture participation that cannot be visualised. In this sense, it can be argued that the analytical tool of visualisation played a fundamental role in the development of the research outcomes of this PhD by opening up to what we could see on the one hand, yet limiting our vision on the other.

Some feedback from the students about their virtual world experience was, nevertheless, forthcoming from the debriefing session in Lesson 1 and in the research partnership Round Table in Lesson 10. Both of these activities were part of the course syllabus. The limitations of this data set, however, were observed in the data classification stage as mentioned in Chapter 6, Section 6.2.1. At that point, as a researcher, I made the conscious decision to stick to the EP approach of not burdening students with additional requests for information outside of their time in class but did collect some information about the general set-up of the course at Bielefeld University in relation to a general
discussion of learner motivation in our context. This was achieved through additional conversations with DB at the Language Centre of the University of Bielefeld and by accessing the relevant online description of the course, the Language Centre and its activities. The decision to embrace in full the EP approach to Practitioner Research was based on my personal and practitioner researcher beliefs that this kind of approach was necessary and that the more challenging it was, the greater the need to see this approach through to the end. In hindsight, I can say that it was probably this conviction that led me to opt for visualisation as my main research tool as discussed above.

An additional explanation for the exclusion of data about the affective dimension to learner participation can be found in the design of the course. As discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.7 in relation to the design process, the course was shaped by the design team’s joint conceptualisation of learner participation and the tension around learner participation as “doing” expressed by KH and my need as a teacher for target language use on the one hand, and “being” as exemplified in the feedback session in Lesson 1, on the other. It can be argued that this focus on learner participation as doing at least in the first half of the course ultimately also contributed to the emergence of a discussion around participation within this research project as primarily contextualised and intentional non-verbal interaction. An example, however, of a more balanced approach to learner activity within the environment as both doing and being as defined within this research project can be found in the description of the Italian for Beginners course (Avalon, n.d.a) created under the Avalon project. In this course design, each lesson allowed for a clearly structured “doing” as movement and exploration and a more “reflective” moment in which learners discussed with the teacher their emotions and their general experience of the platform. This had been justified in the course description at the time as a way of contributing to educational exploration of virtual worlds for language learning in line with our mandate under the Avalon project. In
short, what is explored is often determined by the mandate and the funding body to which we answer in terms of R&D. As far as my specific research into learner participation within this study is concerned, the limitations of the EP design in relation to the collection of data about the affective dimension to learner participation could have been circumvented with the inclusion of more “reflective” moments or group discussions within the course structure. Future EP research projects may want to take this into consideration as a way of including more of the emic perspective.

8.4.2 Exclusion of data about intercultural awareness

A final additional area that did not emerge at all in this research project is that of learner participation in relation to a discussion of culture or intercultural learning and awareness as highlighted by the telecollaboration literature within CMCL (e.g. Belz and Thorne, 2006; Dooly, 2008; Guth and Helm, 2010; Jauregi et al., 2011; Jauregi and Bañados, 2008; 2010; O’Dowd, 2006a; Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen, 2010). Again, the explanation for this is most likely to be found in the course design through which the institutional needs of the three organisations at the time were expressed and which can be seen as having clamped down, in a way, on our use of the representational dimension of the virtual world and its potential openness in relation to telecollaboration and intercultural learning opportunities, for example. In short, the course design and focus played a role in shaping the information that was forthcoming under the research project.

8.5 Recommendations

8.5.1 Implications for practice

In line with Lamy’s (2004) call for greater attention to be paid to the actional component in online learning, it can be argued that a more holistic understanding of learner participation in virtual worlds as presented in this thesis will enable teachers to place equal value in language learning in virtual worlds on the role played by non-
verbal interaction and verbal interaction through text-based chat and voice-chat. I would also suggest that specific feedback or debriefing sessions be included as part of teaching practice as this can assist teachers in gaining an understanding of learner motivation and affect in relation to participation in the environment and how this may be affecting their learning. This recommendation is line with recommendations made by Deutschmann and Panichi (2009a) and Molka-Danielsen and Panichi (2010) specifically.

8.5.2 Recommendations for design

In view of the outcomes of this research project and the discussion in this final chapter, I would like to suggest that the scope of learner participation is enhanced by design processes that make the most of the specific affordances of the platform with particular attention to the performative and representational dimensions as defined in Chapter 7, its general immersiveness and its openness. This is in line with the recommendations made by Jauregi et al. (2011) and Deutschmann and Panichi (2009a; 2013), for example. Finally, it is hard to ignore the repeated call in the literature (e.g. de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010; Deutschmann, Panichi and Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Schwienhorst, 2009; Svensson, 2004) to find ways of using virtual worlds for education that do not just replicate our understandings of education from f2f contexts. While this PhD has provided an example of some of the tensions involved in this process within our context, I think a lot would be gained by more focussed and structured research into how our beliefs about education may be limiting our use of virtual world platforms. At the same time, it could be argued that a more creative use of virtual worlds for education could have a wash-back effect on our f2f educational practices as well, creating a positive process of cross-fertilisation between the virtual and the non-virtual.

In this sense I would like to suggest that virtual world platforms are not only a research tool that is able to inform us about what we do in the virtual world but also about what we do in the non-virtual world. A similar understanding of the blurring of the
distinctions between virtual worlds and the physical world in education is also suggested by Martin (2013b).

8.5.3 Recommendations for the Euroversity Good Practice Framework

The Euroversity Good Practice Framework (Euroversity, 2013) aims to provide guidelines to practitioners in the field of virtual world education in general. The recommendations that I feel are in order, in view of my findings, are that virtual world education maximise the immersive dimension of the platform and that we find a way of increasing practitioner and developer awareness of how to exploit the platform so that it is supportive of our educational needs while also enabling us, as a community of practitioners, to conceptualise new understandings about education at the same time. These considerations are also in line with the gist of the presentations and panel discussion at the Manchester seminar on virtual worlds in education in March 2014 (Euroversity, 2014).

8.6 Future research and conclusions

Based on the discussion in Chapter 7 and some of the issues that have emerged in this chapter, future research may want to take into consideration two angles in particular: learner affect in relation to learner participation and virtual world research methodology. As mentioned several times in Chapter 7 and discussed above in Section 8.4.1, not enough information was forthcoming under this research project about learner affect and sense of presence in relation to the virtual world (e.g. Peterson, 2011; Schwienhorst, 2004a; 2009). Similarly, there was no information about the sense of belonging and community building in relation to participation as discussed in the literature (e.g. Hrasinski, 2008; Molka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi, 2010; Molka-Danielsen and Panichi, 2010; Norton, 2001) nor is there any information forthcoming about learner preferences or beliefs about learning (e.g. Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001) in relation to the virtual world platform. In addition, the discussion in
this thesis has indicated that research is needed that looks more specifically at the relationship between design and learner participation on the one hand, and teacher beliefs and design, on the other. For example, future research may want to consider differences in outcomes in learner participation when working within different pedagogical paradigms to those of CLT and BANA language teaching contexts. From a research methodology perspective, future research may want to take into consideration the compilation of multiple perspectives on virtual world learner activity and participation either by compiling recordings from different computers/avatars or by providing more information about learner concurrent activity which is not visible in the virtual world. As suggested above, another approach could be to include think-aloud protocols of learner observations and comments of their interactions in the virtual world as captured by recordings. Finally, future research may also want to look at the outcomes from other courses run in the virtual world through the lens of visualisation in an attempt to confirm, disprove or expand on the findings of this PhD.
Glossary

**Immersive**: “Immersive” refers to the quality of the experience users have when engaged in activity within a virtual world. In general, the more the experience feels “real” to the user, the greater the immersive quality of the overall experience. The adjective “immersive” can be used to refer to both the quality of the experience for the user and to the characteristics of the virtual world platform itself. A discussion of use of the term “immersive” as it appears in the virtual world educational literature is provided in Chapter 1.

**Intentionality**: Intentionality is the term I have used to describe the extent to which a specific avatar action (i.e. movement, interaction with an object, interaction with another avatar) in the virtual world can be understood as being carried out intentionally by the student within the context of the learning task at hand. Different aspects of intentionality are discussed in Chapter 7.

**Performative dimension of avatars**: For the purposes of this study, I have categorized the performative dimension of avatars as that which enables users to act in the environment. The performative dimension includes all avatar activity, interactivity and interaction with others within the platform. Examples of the performative dimension of avatars are provided in Chapter 7.

**Representational dimension of avatars**: With the term “representational dimension”, I refer to the relationship between avatars and the representation of self that is afforded by the virtual world platform. This definition is based on a recent rereading of my previous
publications (Deutschmann and Panichi, 2009a; Panichi, Deutschmann and Mokka-Danielsen, 2010) and is discussed in some detail in Chapter 7.

**Transient spaces:** The initial use of the term “transient space” in relation to learning in virtual worlds is to be found in Mokka-Danielsen, Deutschmann and Panichi (2009). According to this understanding, virtual worlds can be modified so that they can visually represent different types of learning spaces and allow for a variety of educational experiences. A discussion of transient spaces as it appears in the virtual world educational literature is provided in Chapter 3. Examples of transient spaces in relation to my research project are discussed in Chapter 7.

**Visualisation:** The term “visualisation” is used within this thesis with reference to both the analytical process of reading visual data and to one of the ways in which learner participation manifests itself in virtual world platforms. As a methodological approach, visualisation it discussed with reference to Mason (2002) in Chapters 6 and 7. As a manifestation of participation, it is discussed in full in Chapter 7.
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