



Enhancing the ESP Lesson with IMMERSE: a Pedagogical Example of a Metaverse Language Learning Platform

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Abstract

Virtual Reality (VR) is becoming significantly prevalent in the field of education and has been proven, among others, to increase student motivation and commitment to the lesson, to simulate contextualised scenarios for learning and to help students practise their public speaking skills. This innovative technology has provided unprecedented opportunities for student interaction with the lesson content which is achieved through the multisensory experience it offers and the replacement of interaction with immersion. In fact, some VR-related impediments, such as the high cost of the hardware (for tethered headsets), the set-up of the computer hardware and correct connection of the Head Mount Display (HMD), are gradually being overcome due to the emergence of more commercially accessible VR standalone headsets (in price and ease of equipment use), like Oculus Quest 2. However, even though the number of VR applications has been exponentially increasing, most of these applications are not designed to support teaching practices and they lack pedagogical foundation. The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a field which can benefit from VR since the latter can provide ESP learners with virtual trips to professional contexts, it can increase their experiential element and simulate authentic conditions, and it can also help with vocabulary retention. This paper aims to theoretically propose ways that IMMERSE, an educational metaverse language learning platform, can enhance the learning experience of ESP students. Specifically, it is believed that the affordances of the platform (various real-life contexts, high levels of immersion and interactivity) as well as its fundamental elements of language immersion practice (functional language, culture, and community building) can enhance the ESP lesson and provide more contextualised opportunities for students to practise the language.

Keywords: IMMERSE, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), immersive learning, Virtual Reality-assisted language learning (VRALL)

1. Introduction

Innovative technologies like VR and, generally, immersive media have become more mainstream and more affordable for educational use in the past decade. Some older affordable VR devices included Samsung Gear VR, Oculus Go, and Oculus Quest. Currently, some popular standalone VR headsets which do not require a smartphone and do not need to be tethered to a computer are Oculus Quest 2 and HTC Vive Focus 3. As for language learning, all these devices have provided learners with more exciting opportunities for interactive and experiential lessons since VR, in general, has paved the way for immersive and simulated practice of a language, which was not previously possible with other technologies. As for the selection and potential use of VR applications in the language classroom, a common problem that may occur is that most of these applications are not exclusively designed for educational purposes which could pose as an impediment for educators in supporting the pedagogical implementation [1] of these applications in the lesson. Regarding the teaching and learning of foreign languages through VR, some applications commonly used are Mondly VR [2] and ImmerseMe [3]. In Mondly VR, the user can interact with a pedagogical avatar in authentic scenarios with speech recognition and feedback. Moreover, according to Berti [4], ImmerseMe is more suitable for learners who do not have access to the target language outside the formal instructional setting, not so much for students.

The teaching of ESP is goal-oriented and based on the specific needs of students. The use of technology in ESP contexts has drastically transformed the ESP learning environment since learners can become more autonomous in the learning process and they can benefit from more communicative and interactive activities related to their profession [5]. As for VR and ESP, Dashtestani & Stojković [5]



cite virtual worlds/serious games in ESP instruction in their literature review, emphasising the lack of evidence for learning outcomes in the literature. The implementation of VR in the context of ESP is still in its infancy. This paper aims to fill in that gap by theoretically proposing ways that IMMERSE, an educational metaverse language learning platform, can pose as a pedagogical example for ESP learners and how it can enhance their learning experience. Moreover, it aims to introduce ways this platform can help ESP language instructors and practitioners to integrate VR in the lesson.

2. IMMERSE

Founded in 2017, IMMERSE has revolutionised the field of VR language teaching and learning. Having, both, a social and educational character, one of its pillars is the concept of 'community'. It aims at creating a sense of community among learners with common interests and learning needs who will converse with real people in realistic immersive contexts. Moreover, IMMERSE is the first synchronous VR language teaching and learning platform [6], and has focused ever since on long-term linguistic interactions and not on rudimentary understanding of vocabulary and sounds. At present, it is the leading metaverse language learning platform and it has launched a Spanish language learning programme, followed by French, English, and Japanese in the upcoming months. 'Metaverse' is currently a popular term and according to Ball [7], it is "a massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered 3D virtual worlds that can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence" (pp. 29).

2.1 Practising functional language in the IMMERSE "experiences"

Teaching ESP requires the knowledge and practice of functional language within a real-life professional context. Students need to have a clear understanding of phrases and concepts related to their field of study. This involves specialised language students are required to use in workplace settings. Traditionally, this would revolve around vocabulary activities from a textbook or listening exercises in short dialogues. In IMMERSE, instructors can create scenarios and assign groups (Figure 1) of students within authentic contexts. Figure 2 also shows some of the "experiences" (the locations) where students can practice contextualised language. Some examples of "experiences" that are suitable for ESP purposes are the Networking Event, the News Station, the Hotel Room, the Resort, The Airport Departure, The Doctor Office, etc. Many disciplines could benefit from this type of practice such as "Public Communication", "Tourism and Hospitality Management", "Nursing", etc.



Figure 1: The "Emergency" experience (Image Credit: IMMERSE)

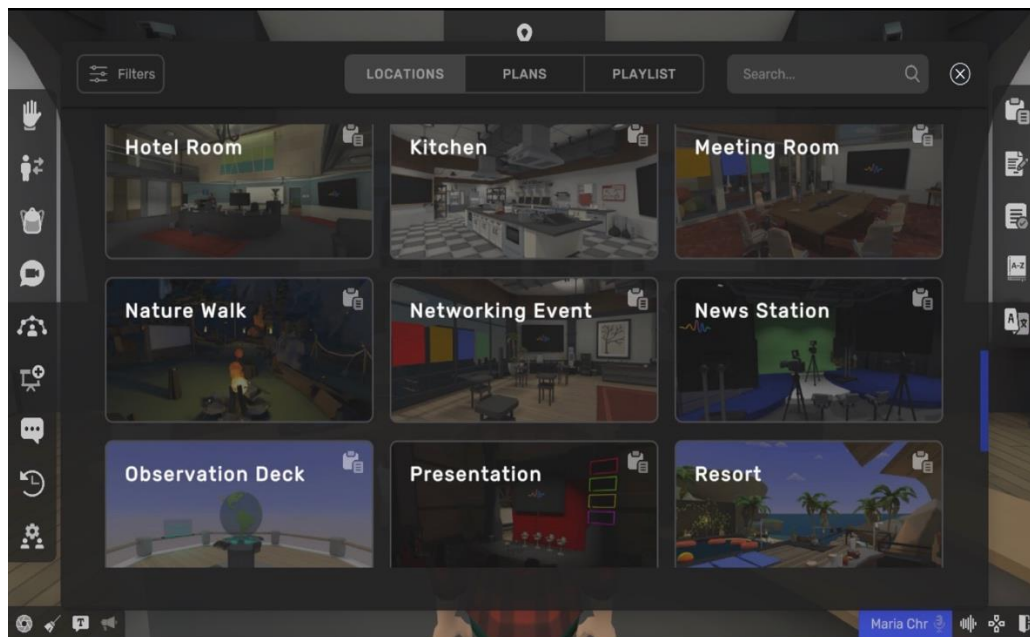


Figure 2: Some of the “experiences” in IMMERSE (Image Credit: IMMERSE)

2.2 Developing Soft Skills

ESP teachers are expected to teach their students about the culture of their future workplace settings within the classroom, which is not always feasible. Currently, the development of soft skills in students is more necessary than ever. The practice of soft skills could help students meet the demands of the job market to a great extent, especially in today’s globalised world. The difference between hard skills and soft skills is that hard skills can be measured and evaluated more easily (technical and academic skills) like language proficiency, knowledge of interface design, etc., whereas soft skills depend on a person’s interpersonal skills, for example, convincing skills, problem-solving skills, etc. IMMERSE’s novel approach to language immersion can offer opportunities for students to co-exist with students of common professional interests in environments which simulate real-life workplace settings. Through Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), language instructors can design pedagogical, meaningful tasks students can carry out towards a common goal [8] and customise their lessons. TBLL is a communicative approach that focuses on the implementation of real-life tasks, using the target language. Figure 3 shows a realistic setting where students can practise their presentation skills and express themselves in front of a real audience in an immersive environment.



Figure 3: Building Presentation skills in front of an audience (Image Credit: IMMERSE)

These kinds of tasks help students overcome their fear of public speaking, especially in a second or foreign language like English, mainly for two reasons. The first reason is that the use of an avatar could possibly make students more comfortable with speaking in L2 and lower their anxiety, and the second one is because the setting is more contextualised, which is something a real ESP classroom cannot offer. Moreover, Figure 4 demonstrates the News Station “experience”. A possible scenario could involve students performing a task to practise their problem-solving skills related to a work emergency like broadcasting the latest news. Figure 4 shows a realistic television setting with cameras, a seating area, screens etc.



Figure 4: News broadcasting in the “News Station” (Image Credit: IMMERSE)

Figure 4 also contains a visual of the “Placeables” which is a very interactive feature of the platform with many affordances. Through the “Placeables”, teachers can place items within the specific room they are in, for example, a whiteboard or a scoreboard. Moreover, there is a possibility to upload a video from YouTube while being immersed in the specific “experience”.

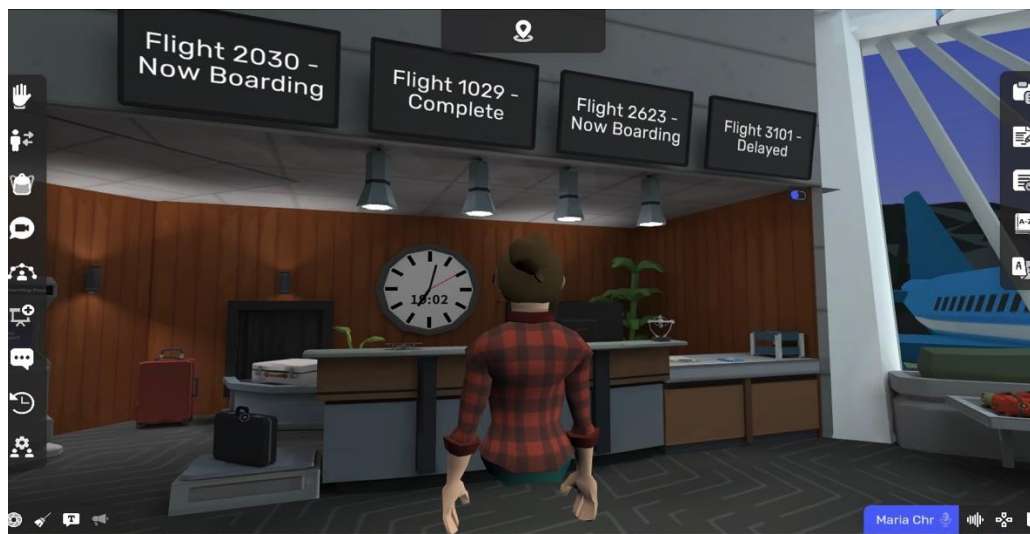


Figure 5: The Airport Departure “experience” (Image Credit: IMMERSE)

Problem-solving skills and communication skills can also be practised and developed in the Airport Departure location. Figure 5 offers a visual representation of a check-in desk with flight information on each screen and depending on the scenario, students can acquire different roles, for example, a passenger, a flight attendant, etc. Students can also change their characters from a member of the staff to a passenger and vice versa.

2.3 Building a sense of “community”

All ESP students will enter a community of practice (CoP) in their future workplace, comprised of people with mutual interests, common knowledge, and need for knowledge sharing and building. An ESP lesson in the varying locations found in IMMERSE is more than the simple practice of English for professional purposes since students can collaborate, they can mutually guide each other towards the completion of tasks, and they can learn to negotiate meanings socially in a simulated professional context, acting as a virtual CoP. An immersive, interactive 3D environment can nurture a sense of ‘togetherness’ in students who will learn through experience.

Conclusion

This paper has theoretically proposed ways that IMMERSE, an educational metaverse language learning platform, can enhance and transform the learning experience of ESP students. It also aimed at introducing this platform to ESP language instructors and practitioners who wish to provide their students with more engaging ways of communicating, interacting, and collaborating in contextualised settings. The pedagogical use of VR for language learning is gaining attention. VR is an integral part of the Metaverse technologies, which makes it necessary for ESP instructors to implement this technology in their lessons and for ESP students to familiarise themselves with it.

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