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Virtual reality, real engagement? Exploring engagement in Second Life language-learning environments.

This study explores the effects of the on-line learning environment of Second Life on learner engagement in Social English courses for Doctoral students. These courses were made available to students under the *Kamimo Islands* project funded by the Norwegian University Programme (*Norgesuniversitetet*).

In response to the demands of an increasingly digitalised global "learning society," the potential offered by on-line learning environments in promoting cross-national collaboration is gradually being realised.

In our study we compare the effects on engagement of Second Life, a 3D modulated on-line "world" where users take on the shape of animated persona, and Marratech, a more traditional video conferencing tool. Both environments support real time audio, chat and the possibility to present text/images on whiteboards. Based on a corpus of material collected from six learning sessions in the two environments, we compare engagement measured in terms of levels of learner participation and language/content retention (i.e. in reformulations of peer contributions, floor space and teacher-learner interviews). Results suggest that the use of Second Life, in particular, may lower anxiety levels and affective filters leading to greater learner participation and engagement.

Finally, this paper presents a list of recommendations for other educators who wish to include this format in their teaching practice.