

## Avatar English SLanguages 2007 Poster

### Avatar English: a Language School in Second Life

Avatar English is a new online language school offering classes mainly within Second Life and also using external VOIP (such as Skype) for voice aspects in lessons. Classes are individual (one-to-one), structured around lesson plans and entirely in English. The school intends to expand into other languages in the future.



### Teaching Methodology

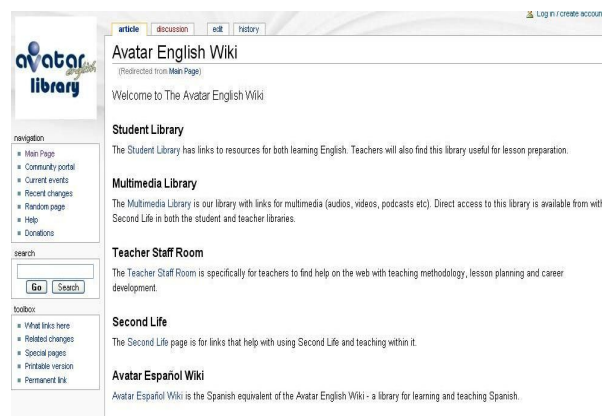
Classes are themed and take place within SL virtual classrooms that are also appropriate to the theme, including some props.

Lessons are planned to ensure they have a pedagogically sound structure and they draw on online resources including, lesson plan databases (eg English-to-go.com), multimedia (eg Youtube) and role plays (various sites or self-developed).

Lessons are developed to focus on speaking and listening skills and only introduce text-based work where this allows for language analysis or allow for visual memory to be involved. This is in large part a response to customer preferences and needs, given that the students often have a background of considerable written and grammar learning and more limited oral practice.

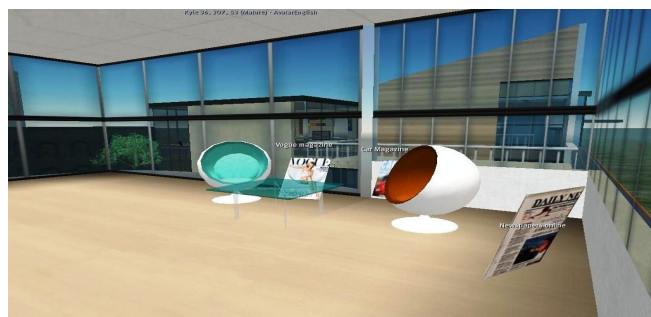
### Further Learning/Teaching Resources (1)

Avatar English has an online library (freely available to all on the net at [www.avatarenglish.com](http://www.avatarenglish.com)), which is a database of online resources. The library takes the form of a wiki to allow for a flexible and continual development by teachers, students and visitors. It is hoped that the collaborative nature of the wiki will increase the sense of ownership both for students and teachers. An in-world library is also being developed, essentially to allow for fast access to online resources from within SL. This SL-based library allows for easier navigation to key points in the wiki-based library and the other facilities discussed below.



### Further Learning/Teaching Resources (2)

Moodle has also been established to allow for organization of resources. The Moodle platform has been primarily constructed for teaching that is organized into courses and programs for multi-student classes. Avatar English is therefore still at an exploratory phase with Moodle. Perhaps SLoodle will prove more appropriate.



There is also a student café at the Avatar English in-world campus. This is to provide students with a place to socialize with fellow students and as such is modeled on the similar concept often found in RL language schools. The café is a comfortable zone with access to online magazines, newspapers and multimedia. In this sense, it blurs with the library. Clearly a critical mass of students is needed for the socializing function.

Podcasts and blogs will be integrated into the teaching methodology at Avatar English and so students will be able to create blogs and podcasts to be hosted on the school's server for access to all.

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### **School Ideology**

Languages are more spoken than written (it is interesting to consider words for language in some other European languages: Sprache, lingua, langue, ЯЗЫК) and so the school uses VOIP messengers (such as Skype) at all times. These external messengers are simpler to configure (than internally used voice systems) and have the advantage of allowing other functions such as file sharing.

Classes should cater to the needs of the students, which leads the school to use a flexible approach in the teaching methodology. Lessons are therefore individualized, while still based on structured plans.

Collaboration amongst teachers and also with students needs to be encouraged to create large resource pools for both teachers and learners. This has led to the use of an online wiki-based library, and will go further in terms of the type of relationship sought between the school and its teachers and students.

### **Future Challenges for Teaching in SL (1)**

Web 2.0 is well established and the 3D web is becoming increasingly mainstream both for society in general and education in particular. The question for language teaching in SL is therefore “**how**” and not “**whether**”. As the 3D web develops and becomes more the norm, the focus of attention will shift away from the technology (and SL is really just a tool) and more onto the quality of teaching.

What is the SL “tool” good for? SL at the very least allows for an online version of RL teaching, which is no small feat. The recreation of a classroom in an online 3D world allows for a more globalized teaching, and a more flexible, convenient distance-learning delivery of ESL.

How can SL teaching go further? SL teaching needs to serve the educational needs of “Digital Natives” through providing them with a more exploratory and creative learning environment. How can SL teaching provide a social context? How can SL encourage students to learn by doing (rather than just practice what has been instructed). How can SL teaching better relate to RL experiences so that lessons have greater relevance? Or are SL and RL one and the same for Digital Natives?

### **Future Challenges for Teaching in SL (2)**

Virtual quests within SL (currently being championed by Chris Swaine) offer excellent opportunities to create a more dynamic and student driven teaching methodology. Avatar English is starting to explore them while considering the following challenges: How can quests be developed to allow for greater conversational (not just text-chatting) practice? How can they be adapted for one-to-one teaching? How can they be combined with non-SL tools?

SL rather uniquely allows residents to freely construct in-world. Avatar English is keen to learn more about Kip Boahn’s experiences with building in ESL classes at English Village. Could construction be a part of a virtual quest, while maintaining a focus on the ESL?

SL is one of many tools. It can and should be combined with other online and offline tools such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, internet, Google Earth/maps. Here the focus should be on the teaching and not the technology.

### **Student Response**

Students have expressed very positive feedback in a general sense. Feedback has been sought with a very specific aim to gain a sense of how lessons could be improved. It is therefore less clear whether students are more satisfied with the teaching quality rather than the technology. The ultimate tests are whether the students improve their English and whether they feel this improvement. Mark Bain (TESOL Diploma student researching EFL in SL) has expressed an interest in surveying students to better understand their experience of SL teaching.

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### Future Projects by Avatar

Avatar English intends to offer other languages such as Spanish in the near future. There are also plans to offer lesser taught languages such as Aymara and Quechua from the Andes region. Offering lesser taught languages allows much greater access to them around the world (currently it is very difficult to find teachers of these languages outside South America) and correspondingly offers the languages and their teachers an opening to the rest of the world. SL in particular will allow an interesting environment for languages that have a more verbal than written tradition. A new teaching style may develop from the exploration of the 3D web as a medium for online language teaching, focusing more on the oral and experiential than on written and analytical approaches.

As discussed above, Avatar English is keen to explore other online tools for combination with SL lessons. Other 3D web tools may also offer opportunities to explore, such as there.com and Entropia.



### Personal Background: Howard Vickers

Avatar English was established by Howard Vickers, an Englishman living in La Paz, Bolivia. Howard is a CELTA qualified English teacher with experience in Russia (EFL school), Spain (British Council), Bolivia (EFL school) and SL (Avatar English). He graduated in German and Russian and also speaks Spanish. Teaching in SL represents a move back into English teaching having pursued a career in sustainable rural development, where he has worked in NGO and DFID projects in Eastern Europe and the Americas.

### Final Thought

How do we separate the issues around teaching in SL from those around teaching in general?

### Contact Details

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