

# ‘ITBRIDGE’ EXPERIENCING ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

ANDREA BENASSI  
ANSAS,  
Florence, Italy

We all know that one of the best ways to learn a foreign language is... to *experience it* in a foreign country. *Experience* is in fact the key-word that led us to design **language didactics** in Second Life. From December '07 to April '08 we involved 5 students connected from the USA in an Italian language pilot project called ‘itBridge’. Our aim was not just to recreate didactical settings, but to design **full experiences** in which students can be completely immersed. The goal of the experience is not only to learn the language, but also to learn about **Italian culture**.

## 1 Why ‘experience’?

### 1.1 *The best way to learn a foreign language is... to go ‘there’*

One of the best ways to learn a language is to make an *experience* in a foreign country.

We kept this in mind when we thought to a **foreign language didactics** through the use of Virtual Worlds.

To recreate a series of typical environments that we normally find in a foreign country: the airport, the museum, the disco pub. Environments where students may be immersed in *real life experiences*, such as taking part to a wedding, attending a business meeting, visiting an art exhibition: situations in which they are forced to interact with people and things that speak another language.

It’s the typical *learning-by-experience* approach, so different from what happens at school, where we learn almost totally *by description*: we listen, we read, we store, often without any previous experience of what we are listening and reading and storing.

After all, the classroom environment is not the ideal place to... have experiences. Sometimes we give it a try, just in the foreign language class, simulating to be at the restaurant or to the doctor or at the post office, namely trying to stage situations aimed to language learning.

But, of course, we are far from being able to consider it an *experience*.

### 1.2 *Designing experiences in Second Life*

Second Life has an enormous potential - for the most part still unexpressed - as *experience generator*.

It’s something that goes beyond the simple interaction between avatars, building items or services exchange. It’s rather to create situations, circumstances, also feelings, states of mind. Of course... we can already experience situations or feelings in Second Life. But this is often a *random fact*, with no relations to any kind of predefined goal.

I’m talking about a new kind of expertise, **Experience Design**. An almost unexplored field (except by the same old game gurus and a few others), that find in Second Life an ideal playground.

Therefore we tried to go beyond the building of a *place*: the ‘place’, which is essential in order to talk about presence, is only one of the dowels. Alongside this, we tried to design *paths*, interactions between objects and people aimed to achieving **learning goals**.

We wouldn’t want to make only a *bunch of backdrops for conversations*, adding nothing to those pseudo-simulations in the classroom reminded above.

### 1.3 *But... can Second Life become... ‘there’?*

No. It can’t. We know.

But, in our opinion, this is not the right question. The question is:

*Is it possible to recreate equivalent learning experiences in Second Life?*

We tried to answer in the ‘itBridge’ pilot project, keeping well in mind a key factor: there are substantial differences between the physical reality and the reality simulated by the current 3D immersive worlds. It’s not a question of graphics realism: it’s about the impossibility to fulfill several primary needs of the human beings.

For example, it's perfectly useless to design experiences in which we expect the students to be thirsty so that they must go to the virtual pub to fulfil that need... no virtual beverage has the power to solve the problem (until now?..) and the experience would come out inevitably compromised.

So, what does it mean? Second Life cannot *feed* any need?

Not at all. The matter is to recognize *those* needs, in order to use them as effective *engines for learning*.

#### 1.4 *The culture behind the language*

Moreover, a language is only one of the many expressions of the culture of a country. It's very difficult to really understand a language *disconnecting it* from its cultural belongings.

Immersive 3D worlds offer the opportunity to recreate *the context around the words*. A context made of environments, objects, situations that become the *edge* and the *emanation* of a foreign culture.

In designing the experiences, we constantly related the linguistic and historical/cultural points of view.

## 2 **Setting the experiences**

### 2.1 *The 'itBridge' pilot project*

'itBridge' is the pilot project led by ANSAS (National Agency for the Development of School Autonomy) in collaboration with the Education Office of Consulate General of Italy.

The experimentation started in December 2007 and ended in April 2008.

Project goal: be successful in convey specific aspects of Italian language and culture through the setting of *pilot experiences*.

The approach that led us since the beginning was the *microlanguage* (a specialistic sector of a language). Each experience would have conveyed a different microlanguage, in a very similar way to many language didactics programs.

Concerning language competence level, we decided to work with **high level students**, in order to totally bypass – at this early stage – the need of any theoretical language lesson stage.

### 2.2 *The students*

The target students we wanted to involve were adults with an high level of Italian language and culture. The project finally saw the participation of 5 English speaking students, resident of the USA, selected through the Italian Consulate in New York.

All the students already knew about Second Life by the media, but they had never entered SL. This was a prerequisite that let us observe and assess the impact of a 3D immersive environments towards *newbies*.

In order to do that, it was necessary to provide a training stage that allowed students to deal with the following experiences without running into problems due to lack of knowledge of the Second Life interface or a poor practicality with commands and functions.

The students, connected by several remote locations, didn't know each other: the only contacts among them (and between them and the teachers) occurred through Second Life.

### 2.3 *The teachers*

*... what does a teacher do inside an experience?*

Certainly, he does not teach. At least... not in the traditional sense. He has to be not *only* a language expert, but also – and especially - an expert of that particular field corresponding to that particular microlanguage (e.g. an architect for the architectural area, and so on). Therefore it's clear that it was not possible to contact only one person. We needed different experts for different experiences. In doing that, of course, we gave priority to people who was a teacher or had had a previous experience as a teacher.

### 2.4 *The 2 experiences*

We have chosen to set 2 experience, which are different either by microlanguage and by methodology. As it will show up further, what makes them different is – above all - the different role played by the teacher and by the students.

- Guided tour of San Francis basilica in Assisi



In Second Life there is an evocative and realistic reproduction of San Francis Basilica in Assisi. We considered it an optimal choice to simulate a guided tour, very close to the real one, daily performed in Assisi. Students are conducted by a guide through the *Basilica Inferiore* and *Basilica Superiore*, in order for them to admire Giotto's 28 frescos and Cimabue's paintings, and have a better understanding of the life of Italy's Patron Saint.

For the role of teacher/guide, we found Costanza, a *true*, official guide from Umbria.



Duration: 1 meeting/2 hours.

Microlanguage: the Middle Ages Italian art

- **Interior Design in an Italian Farmhouse**



The *experience* is set in a *casale umbro*, namely a typical farmhouse of Umbria, a region in central Italy. Students *wear the clothes* of architects/interior designers: each of them has to renovate/furnish 1 of the 5 residential units – intentionally empty, totally unadorned – under the instructions and the control of a teacher/*master builder*. In doing that, they have to get confidence with the Italian habits: how the Italian peoples *live* their homes? e.g. the living room. What do they like in fact of decorations? And so on. The first step for them is to give an answer to these questions, if they really prospect to *satisfy the customer*. For the teacher/*master builder* role we had Luca Galletti, a civil engineer, topography teacher in an Italian secondary school and Second Life building expert: he is the builder of the *casale umbro*, a meticulous reproduction of a real existing one in the country near Perugia..



Duration: 5 meetings/2 hours each one.

Microlanguage: Italian Contemporary architecture and interior design.

### 3 PLAY >>

#### 3.1 The Training Stage



The training stage was divided in 6 meetings/lessons once a week, 1 hour each. At this stage we treated the Second Life *fundamentals*: text and voice chat, inventory, avatar customization, building. The method we used was *the lecture*, similar to what happens into a traditional classroom, but with a difference: the students had to *try to do* and not only *store content*. Try to produce an object, build a door, put something in inventory, wear an hat.



It became immediately clear that it wouldn't be an easy job for some of them. And, above all, it became clear that the main issue was not the software interface: for some of them it was rather to *redefine the relationship with the computer*. Re-learn to use it in another way.

On the contrary, other students found the training stage an easier, almost natural job. Because - they said - of a certain confidence with video games and, probably, of an empirical approach (*nerd style*) to the pc.

Certainly this level oddness played an heavy role in the training stage, contributing to create some problems: the same task that was a *one-shot-easy-job* for one student, represented a very heavy cognitive load for another one.

On the good side, this early stage - initially considered as *subsidiary* - started to *look like an experience* itself. An experience that, if properly structured, can be *connected* to one or more microlanguages (e.g. building).

### 3.2 Experience #1 - The guided tour of San Francis Basilica in Assisi

The tour took place on April 4, 2008 - 6pm ET.



Costanza, the guide, introduced the *visitors* in the 2 basilicas, lower and upper, and in the underlying *cripta* (crypt). The Italian medieval language of art and architecture is a very specialistic one and - as we expected - it was an hard test for the students. The *cripta* (crypt), the *rosone* (rose window), the *transetto*... the words themselves often led the discussion towards the art and architectural styles hosted in the basilicas: gothic, romanesque... But the Assisi environment primarily talk about Francis of Assisi, patron saint of Italy. A figure whom life and work expressed in many different fields. It was significant a student's response to the question "*Do you know San Francis?*". He replied "*Yes, he's one of the early Italian language writers*": certainly the student had *met* San Francesco in literature (San Francis wrote the first significant poem in the Italian language) and - as a consequence - he recognized him as *writer*. The virtual tour of the basilica made possible to *recompose* the figure of the Saint under various aspects, from literacy to history to art.

One of the most significant moments was surely the visit to the *basilica superiore*, containing the Giotto's and Cimabue's frescos. The frescos *tell by images* the life of the Saint, in an architectural frame that constitutes an extraordinarily rich and evocative visual experience, able to appeal to peoples emotions (as in the aim of the designers).



The reproduction of the *basilica* in Second Life was quite successful in supporting this aspect, letting the visitors to *live* – not only *see* – the environment, and confirming the immersive power of Second Life and virtual worlds in general.



On the 'Cons' side, we have to register the **lack of an active task** for the students, something aiming them toward the learning goal. The consequence was a very poor chance to evaluate the student effective learning process. We know... we could have resorted to one or more traditional evaluation steps (e.g. tests)... but this wasn't what we looked for: our aim was to design learning experiences that let us to evaluate – in an objective way - the student learning process through his *behaviour*.



### 3.3 Experience #2 - Interior Design in an Italian farmhouse

This experience took place over 5 weekly meetings, from March 19 to April 16, 2008.

Unlike the Assisi's experience, here we had a precise student task: to restructure and furnish an home under the typical Italian stylistic canons, suggested and set by the teacher/*master builder*. The *casale umbro* was divided in 5 empty residential units - one for each student - totally empty: no coatings, no furniture, nothing at all: only the (raw) walls and floor.



We initially thought that students should have **built** anything. But, in fact, the use of construction was proven to be quite an heavy load for some of them, coming in addition to the already engaging role of ... *designer in a foreign country*. After the first meeting, we decided to *lighten the load*, allowing students to go to the various stores in Second Life and purchase the furniture. This choice revealed, in fact, not wrong at all: the frequent trips to the stores became one of the richest moments – in didactical terms – of the entire experience. The building of the objects was limited to a few, simple things like floors or dividing walls.



We have to highlight the coming of an additional **teacher**, namely a more explicit teacher figure with the function of ease the job to a specific student. This was needful because of the inappropriate training stage by that student, running into a low level of *adaption* to the Second Life world (see above).

But the very positive fact was the **students products**. They realized some environments that can be considered as effective *evaluation objects*. Some credit goes to the teacher, who has to be clever at strictly connecting the assigned tasks with the learning goals: when it happens, the students choices and products *certify by themselves that learning occurred*.



## 4 Day-after thoughts

### 4.1 So... goal reached?

Partly, yes. What missed is an adequate *literacy* by some students (see below) and an effective task for the students in the #1 experience (“Assisi”). We can talk about success only in the experience #2: “Interior Design” had success in conveying a specific aspect of the Italian language and culture, and let us evaluate it *inside* the experience.

### 4.2 Some key points:

- **Virtual Worlds Literacy**

Virtual Worlds are a *disruptive technology*. They force us to redefine the human-computer *relationship*. It needs a sort of *new literacy*, and we have to keep it in mind if we want learning experiences in Second Life to be fully effective.

- **The active environment**

It is important for the environment to *play an active* role in the experience. The location cannot just be a *background* for the activities. Students must be engaged not only in the conversation, but also *through* the surrounding environment.

- **The hidden teacher**

The teacher is no longer *in front of* the students, but ***inside the experience***. It is a less obvious role: he’s *camouflaged* in to the environment. And the role has not only to do with the language, but also with *that* particular aspect (artistic, historic, traditional) of ***the culture of a country*** which is the core of every single experience.

- **The Evaluation Matter or... the importance of getting the job done**

How should learning be evaluated in this kind of didactics? The most interesting answer comes from the “Interior Design” experience in which, on the basis of individual tasks, students produced something that represents an effective *evaluation objects*. No further test is necessary: the students products *speak for themselves*.

### 4.3 Next steps:

We’re planning to give a follow up to the project, applying it to a lower language level (intermediate).

Our long term goal is to elaborate a complete offer, articulated in a rich package of microlanguages and modulable on different language levels.

## Aknowledgments

Thanks to:

**Giuseppina Staderini**, pedagogist and educational researcher at ANSAS, for the constant contribution in developing the activities .

**Alfio Russo**, director of the Education Office of the Consulate General of Italy in New York, for his support during the entire project.

**Simone Brunozi** and his group at WEDOIT for the splendid reproduction of the basilica and for supporting us in the Assisi experience.

**Arianna Bernardini** (aka Vaniglia Oh in SL), language teacher and communication expert, for her contribution and for supporting the students during the experiences.

**Luca Galletti** for the wonderful *casale* and, above all, for his passion and competence.

**Maria Guida** (aka Marinu Gaussman in SL), teacher of Maths in RL and also a great photographer, for supporting the students during the activities and for her passion in doing that.

## References

### **SecondLearning Italy (an ANSAS project)**

<http://www.secondlearning.it>

### **ANSAS - Agenzia Nazionale per lo sviluppo dell'Autonomia scolastica (formerly INDIRE)**

via Buonarroti 10

Florence, Italy

<http://www.indire.it>

### **Consulate General of Italy – Education Office**

690, Park Avenue

New York, NY 10065

[http://www.consnewyork.esteri.it/Consolato\\_NewYork/Menu/I\\_Servizi/Per\\_i\\_cittadini/Direzione\\_Didattica](http://www.consnewyork.esteri.it/Consolato_NewYork/Menu/I_Servizi/Per_i_cittadini/Direzione_Didattica)