

Student and Instructor Experiences in a Task-based EFL-speaking Course Conducted in a Two-dimensional Virtual Space

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Teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) is experiencing notable changes due to advancements in digital technology. Traditionally, language teaching has been limited to physical classrooms and, more recently, various online platforms. Among these, video conferencing tools such as *Teams* and *Zoom* have rapidly emerged as key platforms. Nevertheless, while it is certainly possible to conduct effective online teaching using these tools, they have not been entirely satisfactory. They present challenges to teaching EFL speaking classes, such as (1) difficulty in monitoring student activities while moving between breakout rooms, (2) difficulty in ensuring tasks are on track to effectively manage time, (3) difficulty in assessing whether the time provided for the task is adequate, and (4) difficulty in identifying errors that require feedback.¹ In such circumstances, the emergence of virtual reality platforms has increased interest in alternative digital teaching formats. Using virtual spaces such as *Second Life* and *Gather.Town*² can help address these issues associated with video conferencing tools. These spaces allow student activities to be monitored more intuitively, surpassing the limitations of video conferencing tools. This paper describes the practical application of such platforms in university classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing insights gained from these experiences of students and an instructor and discussing how these virtual spaces have been effectively integrated into language teaching.

VIRTUAL REALITY USE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Building on the challenges posed by video conferencing tools in teaching EFL speaking classes, the use of virtual reality platforms has emerged as a noteworthy solution. These platforms not only address limitations such as monitoring student pair/group activities and providing timely feedback but also foster greater learner motivation and create a more relaxed, engaging learning environment. The integration of virtual reality platforms into language teaching offers a promising means to overcome the limitations of video conferencing-based online teaching methods. Among the various virtual reality platforms available, *Second Life* has attracted considerable attention since its inception for its innovative approach to language learning. Numerous studies have explored its potential, revealing a wide range of benefits and applications. Additionally, *Gather*, being a two-dimensional virtual space, is easier to use and offers educational features that have led to an increase in its use in recent research. This section examines these studies, highlighting how *Second Life* and *Gather* have been effectively utilized to create motivating and low-anxiety language learning experiences.

Second Life, although not originally designed for language learning, has been recognized in numerous studies as an innovative language learning platform, demonstrating its potential benefits and wide-ranging

applications. Dominguez-Noriega et al. (2011) developed scenarios and applications for second language learning using Second Life, highlighting how learners can practice language skills in realistic, simulated environments through role-play activities in personalized settings, automated avatars, and game-based tests adapted to the virtual world. Chen (2016) further reported that task-based instruction within Second Life enhances intercultural communication skills by offering real-time collaboration and task simulations, providing learners with an interactive space for problem-solving. Additionally, Second Life's playful and low-stress environment has been shown to boost learners' confidence and engagement, contributing to positive emotional outcomes.

Kruk's studies (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022) indicate that Second Life can help reduce learners' anxiety and foster a comfortable environment for taking risks in using the target language, enhancing their confidence and willingness to communicate. These findings align with Melchro-Couto's (2017) research, which highlights how the anonymity provided by avatars helps lower anxiety and reduce the stress associated with speaking, promoting more relaxed communication. Similarly, Wehner et al. (2011) discovered that Second Life's immersive environment considerably boosts student motivation and reduces anxiety. Their comparative study showed that students in a virtual-world-integrated course exhibited higher levels of engagement in language learning activities than those following a traditional curriculum.

Furthermore, Peterson (2012) noted that Second Life fosters collaborative interactions, peer scaffolding, and social cohesion. He explained that engaging with others in a supportive virtual environment promotes the development of language skills and a sense of community. Taken together, these findings suggest that Second Life is an effective language learning tool that creates opportunities for realistic and interactive simulations, with the potential to transform traditional methods and contribute to the enhancement of both language and cultural competencies.

Although Gather is also not specifically designed for language learning, its potential benefits have been highlighted in several previous studies. Zhao and McClure (2024) introduced Gather as a gamified video conferencing platform that combines 2D maps with proximity-based features, allowing for interactions resembling real-life conditions. However, its specific applications in language learning remain underexplored. Chen (2024) investigated the impact of Gather on pre-service EFL teachers in Taiwan and found that the platform positively influenced lesson planning skills and perceived presence, particularly among high-achieving students, who reported significantly higher levels of physical, social, and self-presence.

Gather provides a flexible and effective environment for collaborative learning, featuring proximity-based video conferencing and two-dimensional maps that enable interactions resembling real-life conditions. Compared to Second Life, Gather's simple graphic design and intuitive interface allow learners to stay focused with fewer distractions. While Second Life requires more complex operations, Gather stands out for its ease of use, enabling more efficient learning. Research by Zhao and McClure (2024) highlights these features as contributing to an immersive and interactive experience.

The research on Second Life and Gather indicates that these virtual spaces are promising tools for language teaching. Second Life has been shown to enhance learners' willingness to communicate and reduce anxiety by providing interactions that closely resemble real-world experiences through immersive simulations. On the other hand, Gather provides features that are user-friendly and well-suited for educational purposes. These features help create an environment that supports focused learning. Both platforms are

effective in promoting engaging and low-anxiety learning experiences that support language learning. Based on these research findings, I implemented speaking classes based on task-based language teaching principles with Gather and will now provide a detailed report on this practical application.

TEACHING APPROACHES IN CONTEXT

In light of the points considered earlier, I chose Gather for its relatively easier operation. I set up a classroom space within the platform and conducted speaking lessons based on task-based language teaching principles. In this environment, students engaged in tasks through their avatars, aiming to experience conversations that resemble real-life interactions. By utilizing Gather's intuitive interface and diverse interactive features, I provided a focused and engaging learning environment for the students.

Conditions for the Course and Lessons

The setting for this practice was a compulsory EFL class focused on speaking skills, conducted in the spring semester of 2022 from April to July at a national four-year university in the Chugoku region of Japan. The author served as the instructor for the course. The class consisted of 22 first-year students belonging to departments such as physics, mathematics, informatics, and biology, with specialized courses beginning the following year. For this academic year, the university allowed instructors to choose between conducting lessons online or in-person, considering the influence of COVID-19. Considering the risk of having to switch in-person lessons to online due to the pandemic situation, I opted to deliver the course fully online from the outset to ensure a structured and consistent approach. The university mandates that all students own laptops meeting or exceeding specified requirements, which were used to participate in the class. Additionally, the university has a comprehensive agreement with Microsoft, which grants all students access to Microsoft Teams. For the first session, I used this tool to guide students through logging into and using Gather.

Two-dimensional Virtual Space Gather

From the second session onward, the two-dimensional virtual space Gather was used. During the class implementation, the free version of Gather could be accessed either by downloading the app or via a web browser. There were three main reasons for choosing Gather.³ First, at the time of implementation, the free version allowed up to 25 users to be in the same space simultaneously, which was sufficient for all students and one instructor. Second, as shown in Figure 1, users could easily control their avatars and move freely within the space using keyboard arrow keys, much like in a two-dimensional role-playing video game, making it user-friendly. Finally, as illustrated in Figure 2, the intuitive graphic user interface allowed the instructor to easily arrange and customize the virtual space in advance.

Regarding the arrangement of the virtual space, as shown in Figure 2, the four tiles in the upper left, marked with a sign labeled "01," are set as *private area* tile effects, as indicated on the bottom right of the same figure. The rug illustrated in Figure 3 corresponds to the designated private area. Inside this area, only users whose avatars are within the rug can hear each other, and their voices are not audible to users outside the frame. This makes the area suitable for pair or group activities.

During the implementation of this practice, 12 carpets, including spares, were prepared as shown in Figure 4, each set up as a private area where pairs (or occasionally groups) could work on tasks. When

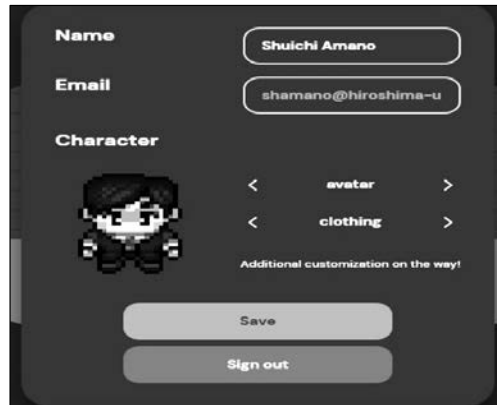


FIGURE 1. Avatar Settings Screen



FIGURE 2. Creating Spaces With an Easy-to-Use GUI

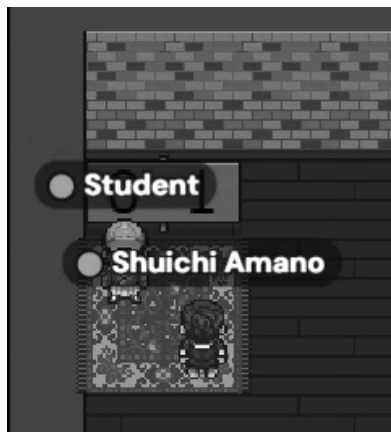


FIGURE 3. Private Area Function (Active Area Within the Frame)

sharing the outcomes of pair activities with the entire class, students would stand on the speaker icon, configured to make their voices audible to everyone in the space using the *spotlight* function. The microphone standing next to the speaker icon is purely decorative. Additionally, to create an atmosphere of beginning

and ending for the class, a separate area was designated, as shown in Figure 5, where students gathered at the start and end of each lesson for explanations of the day's content, announcements of the pair or group assignments, updates on upcoming classes, and information about the final exam.



FIGURE 4. Virtual Classroom for Task Activities

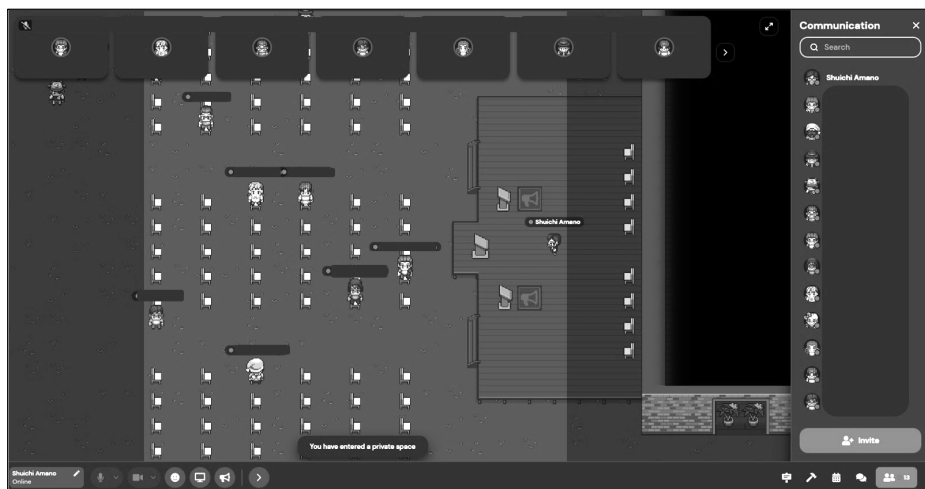


FIGURE 5. Gathering Area at the Start and End of Lesson

Implementation and Preparation of Task-Based Language Teaching

The lessons were conducted using a textbook designed for task-based language teaching (Wicking et al., 2021). This textbook is specifically developed to support instructors in implementing practical, task-based lessons in the classroom. With permission from the publisher, the textbook was used online with all possible measures in place to prevent the unauthorized sharing of materials to non-participants. It includes a variety of tasks, ranging from classic tasks such as finding differences between two pictures through verbal interaction to more distinctive tasks such as describing a national flag verbally while the partner guesses which flag is being described. These tasks encourage students to use EFL in practical contexts, aiming to bridge the gap between in-class lessons and everyday communication. Since the textbook is tailored for task-based language teaching, the resources it provides align with the four key elements that define tasks in this approach (Ellis & Shintani, 2014): (a) a focus on meaning, (b) the presence of some kind of information gap, (c) the requirement for learners to rely on their linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and (d) task completion being assessed based on criteria beyond language use. These elements promote both language proficiency and the practical application of language skills.

OUTCOMES AND CHALLENGES

Observations Noted by the Instructor

As shown in Figure 6, to ensure I did not forget any observations as the instructor, I created a *Slack* thread and recorded observations and student requests in this thread after each lesson, making them easy to review later. Since this Slack workspace is always open while I work, it prevents me from forgetting or misplacing notes, making it a practical tool for maintaining a simple, longitudinal record of the lessons.

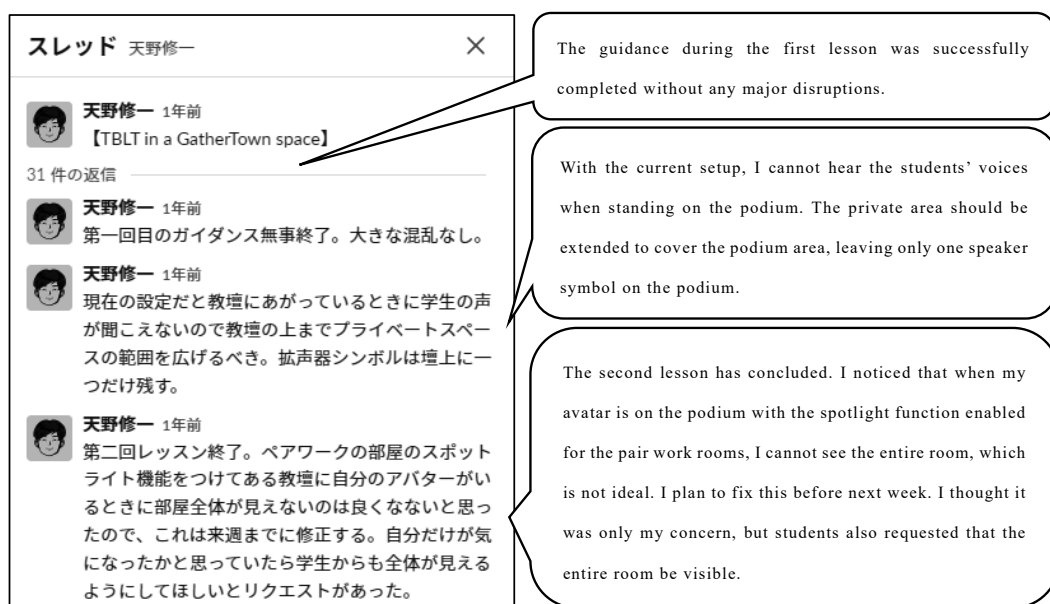


FIGURE 6. Slack Thread for Notes on Observations

Note: The speech balloons are translations of the Japanese notes from the image.

Figure 7 is an excerpt of important notes from the continuation of Figure 6. From this figure, several key considerations for conducting task-based lessons in two-dimensional virtual spaces become apparent. First, platforms like Gather make it easier for instructors to monitor student activities. For example, when students engage in pair work, speech balloons appear as they communicate, so that instructors can visually check if students are actively participating or struggling with the task. This enables real-time monitoring and provides opportunities for timely support. However, technical issues are also noted, highlighting the possibility of problems when using Gather, such as microphones failing to turn on. These issues emphasize the need for instructors to be prepared to respond quickly to technical difficulties and to maintain flexibility in managing the class. In more severe cases, disruptions such as connection failures caused by external services (e.g., Cloudflare servers) could occur. Thus, acknowledging the unavoidable risk of unexpected technical problems is essential, and having a mindset prepared for flexible adjustments in lesson planning is necessary.

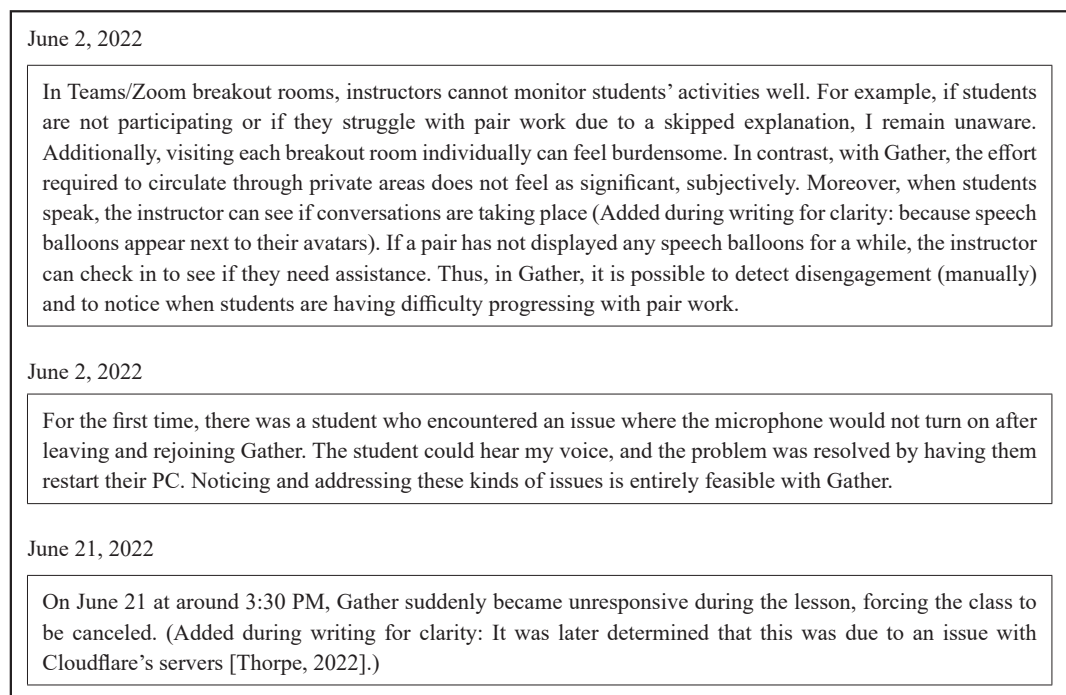


FIGURE 7. Key Excerpt from the Continuation of the Slack Thread.

Student Experiences

Starting from the sixth lesson, approximately one-third of the way through the course, when students were expected to have become accustomed to the lesson format, they were asked to complete a self-assessment of their performance on the textbook's tasks for that day. These tasks included the main task (the first task undertaken after the pre-task activities) and the repetition task (the second task similar to the main task). Students rated their success in these tasks using a three-point scale: "Great," "Just about," or "Bad."

The summary of their responses is presented in Table 1. The data were collected during actual lessons and contain many missing values due to student absences or omissions in responses. However, to accurately reflect the real situation, the missing values were deliberately left untreated and are presented as is. On June 7, self-assessments were skipped due to the mid-semester (first-term) exam.

TABLE 1. Percentage of “Great” in Self-Assessments of Task Performance

Task	May 24	May 31	June 14	June 21	June 28	July 5	July 12	July 19	July 26
Respondents	22	15	22	16	18	20	15	17	19
Main	50.00%	66.67%	68.18%	56.25%	50.00%	90.00%	86.67%	94.12%	89.47%
Repetition	40.91%	66.67%	77.27%	62.50%	88.89%	80.00%	86.67%	100.00%	84.21%

Table 1 indicates a considerable improvement in students’ self-assessments of task performance throughout the course. In the main tasks, the percentage of students who assessed their performance as “Great” increased from 50.00% at the beginning of the course to over 90% by the end. This trend indicates that students gradually became more accustomed to task-based lessons over time. Similarly, in the repetition tasks, the percentage of “Great” responses started at 40.91% and rose to over 80% later in the course. This indicates that these tasks were approachable for students and provided opportunities for them to experience success. Moreover, in the later stages of the course, students consistently rated their performance highly in both main and repetition tasks. This pattern suggests that they had fully adapted to the structure and flow of the lessons. In the final four sessions, the instructor’s observations appear to indicate notable improvements in student performance as well. These findings imply that task-based lessons in Gather might play a role in improving their performance.

Figure 8 presents excerpts from student responses to an open-ended questionnaire regarding task-based lessons in Gather. The students reported a gradual improvement in their skills to speak English throughout the course, expressing that they had gained confidence in their communication and expression skills. During the final lesson of the semester, many students reflected on how their performance had become better compared to the beginning of the course and described the lessons as highly beneficial. The lessons conducted using Gather were particularly praised for being enjoyable and easy to navigate. The students felt that their English-speaking skills had improved over the six months and shared that they found the tasks engaging and enjoyable. Some of them mentioned that, while they initially felt anxious about whether they could successfully complete the tasks on their own, they discovered through participation that mutual understanding was easier to achieve than expected. Additionally, one student commented on the ease of understanding familiar words but found it challenging to grasp the content when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, which highlighted the importance of building a broader vocabulary. These responses collectively indicate that the course contributed to the students’ English proficiency and provided a meaningful learning experience.

- I feel like I've been able to say a little more in English than before.
- Today was the final lesson of the first semester, and I feel that I've become a bit more fluent in speaking English compared to before. It was a very beneficial course.
- The lessons using Gather were enjoyable and easy to follow. Thank you for the past six months.
- I'm glad that I've been able to express more in English.
- Before the course started, I was anxious about whether I could explain things, but I realized that mutual understanding was easier than expected. Even in just four months, I feel like my speaking skills have improved.
- I found that I could understand familiar words easily, but unfamiliar ones made it hard to follow the story's content, which made me realize the importance of building my vocabulary.

FIGURE 8. Excerpted Student Responses to the Open-Ended Questionnaire

Note: The original comments were written in Japanese and translated by the author.

DISCUSSION

In the introduction, four challenges of using web conferencing tools for synchronous online speaking lessons were noted: (1) difficulty in moving between breakout rooms, which makes it challenging to monitor student activities; (2) difficulty in assessing whether task activities are proceeding as planned; (3) difficulty in evaluating whether the time provided for tasks is sufficient; and (4) difficulty in recognizing mistakes that need corrective feedback. These challenges highlight the need for solutions that can help overcome these limitations in synchronous online speaking lessons. In this context, Gather was utilized as a platform with features that potentially address some of these challenges, offering insights into its practical application. Based on actual lesson implementation, two advantages of Gather compared to such tools became apparent: (1) it is relatively easier to circulate among the activity spaces of different pairs/groups, and (2) the speech balloons displayed next to avatars provide a visual indication that conversations are taking place.

Instructors can replace traditional in-class monitoring by entering private areas to oversee pair or group activities, and the minimal time lag when entering these private areas allows for smooth monitoring. Additionally, the speech balloons appearing next to avatars help instructors visually gauge whether most pairs or groups have completed their tasks, making it easier to infer whether the allocated time for task completion was adequate. Regarding the challenge of recognizing errors that require feedback, the ease of circulating within private areas provided some support in addressing this issue. However, it must be concluded that this challenge was not fully resolved, despite the relative advantages offered by Gather.

Based on the above experiences, Table 2 summarizes the differences in monitoring group activities across in-classrooms, web-conferencing tools, and Gather. In traditional classrooms, the burden of monitoring is low, and it is relatively easy to identify inappropriate participation or determine whether conversations are taking place. In contrast, such tasks are more challenging with web-conferencing tools, where the burden of monitoring is considerably higher. Gather, on the other hand, allows instructors to monitor activities within private areas in a manner closer to traditional classrooms. Its ability to visually confirm the presence or absence of conversation, facilitated by features such as speech balloons, is particularly advantageous. However, identifying individual learner errors and recognizing error trends remain highly challenging even with Gather and are almost impossible with web-conferencing tools. This comparison highlights Gather's potential to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of monitoring in task-based lessons conducted in online environments.

TABLE 2. Differences in Group Monitoring Across Three Environments

Type	Classroom (in-class monitoring)	Web-conferencing tool (breakout rooms)	Gather (private areas)
Perceived burden of monitoring	low	high	low
Identification of inappropriate participation	easy	difficult	relatively easy
Tracking the presence or absence of conversation	easy	difficult	easy
Monitoring of trouble occurrences	early	late	with a little effort, early
Monitoring of learner error occurrences	highly difficult yet feasible	extremely difficult	extremely difficult
Identification of learner error trends	highly difficult yet feasible	extremely difficult	highly difficult

CONCLUSION

The use of virtual spaces such as Gather in task-based language teaching appears to offer an effective solution to challenges encountered in web-conferencing tools. This study highlighted how Gather offers unique advantages, such as the ability to visually monitor group activities through speech balloons, smoother navigation between private areas, and an intuitive interface that facilitates interaction and engagement. Compared to web-conferencing tools, Gather provides a more effective environment for real-time monitoring of student participation and task progression, creating conditions that more closely resemble those found in face-to-face classrooms.

While Gather is effective in reducing the burden of monitoring and improving task-based learning experiences, some challenges remain unresolved. The identification of learner errors and trends remains a highly challenging task even with Gather. This issue highlights the need for further exploration of tools or strategies to enhance error detection. Additionally, technical issues, such as server disruptions and microphone failures, present unavoidable risks that emphasize the importance of flexibility and preparedness in online teaching environments.

Overall, the integration of Gather into task-based language teaching has shown promise in creating engaging, low-anxiety learning experiences that support language learning. Students reported improvements in their confidence, communication skills, and task performance throughout the course. These findings suggest that virtual platforms such as Gather not only provide practical solutions to challenges in online language teaching but also offer new opportunities to boost student participation. Further research and refinement are needed to fully leverage the capabilities of virtual learning environments, particularly in addressing ongoing challenges such as error detection and technical stability. It is also important to recognize the potential for web-conferencing tools to continue evolving, making it crucial to stay attentive to advancements in that area. Nonetheless, two-dimensional virtual spaces stand out as a valuable tool that bridges the gap between traditional and online instruction and contributes to the advancement of digital education in the field of language teaching.

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 70th Annual Meeting of the Chugoku-Shikoku Regional Association for University Education (Chugoku-Shikoku-Chiku Daigaku Kyoiku Kenkyukai) on June 17, 2023. The initial English proofreading was conducted using ChatGPT-4.0, followed by subsequent revisions by the author.

NOTES

- 1) This critique was valid at the time of the course implementation. However, in the interest of fairness, it should be noted that current web conferencing tools have considerably improved in facilitating movement between breakout rooms compared to the period described in this paper.
- 2) The official name appears to be *Gather.Town*; however, as the shortened name *Gather* is widely used, this paper will refer to it simply as Gather from here on.
- 3) As a fourth reason, Gather's two-dimensional design, unlike three-dimensional virtual environments, helps avoid virtual reality (VR) motion sickness (Chang et al., 2020; Conner et al., 2022; Guna et al., 2020; Howard & Van Zandt, 2021; Keshavarz & Golding, 2022). Since the target course was a compulsory class, introducing immersive three-dimensional virtual reality could have potentially hindered students prone to VR motion sickness from earning credits required for graduation. This concern necessitated careful consideration and led to the adoption of the two-dimensional platform, Gather. This decision was made in recognition of the fact that the use of virtual reality in education is still in its early stages, with limited information available, and was taken as a precautionary measure. However, as I am not a medical professional, I cannot definitively determine, based on clear and valid evidence, whether VR motion sickness is a critical issue that educators must seriously address when integrating virtual reality into classrooms or merely a relatively minor concern. Consequently, this matter is discussed in an endnote rather than in the main text of this paper.

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ABSTRACT

Student and Instructor Experiences in a Task-based EFL-speaking Course Conducted in a Two-dimensional Virtual Space

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This paper reports on the use of the two-dimensional virtual platform *Gather* in task-based EFL-speaking instruction. Traditional face-to-face classes and video-conferencing tools often present challenges, such as difficulties in supervising activities within breakout rooms, monitoring task progress, and identifying learners' errors. By utilizing *Gather*, these challenges can be addressed, encouraging students to participate actively and enjoyably in task-based activities while improving their conversational skills and confidence in EFL. *Gather*'s speech balloon feature enables visual confirmation of conversations, and its smooth navigation between private areas allows for real-time monitoring and support of activities. However, challenges remain in identifying patterns of learner errors during speaking tasks. Additionally, the potential for technical issues highlights the need for flexibility and thorough preparation in online teaching. The use of *Gather* demonstrates its potential as an effective tool to enhance learners' performance. At the same time, continued attention to the development of video conferencing tools is essential for further improving online learning environments. This paper suggests that two-dimensional virtual platforms can serve as effective means of bridging the gap between traditional and online classes and foster progress in digital education within the field of language teaching.

要 旨

二次元仮想空間を活用したタスクベースの 英語スピーキング指導における学生と教師の経験

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本論文は、タスクベースの英語スピーキング指導における二次元仮想空間 Gather の活用について検討したものである。従来のウェブ会議ツールを用いたスピーキング指導の課題として、ブレイクアウトルーム内での活動の監督が困難であり、タスク進行状況や学習者のエラーを把握しづらい点があった。本論文では、Gather を使用することでこれらの課題に対処しながら、学生にタスク活動を通じて積極的かつ楽しく学習することを促し、英語での会話能力を高めたり、自信を深めたりすることができる可能性を示した。具体的には、アバターの吹き出し機能を活用して会話の有無を視覚的に確認しながらプライベートエリア間を円滑に巡回することで、リアルタイムでの活動把握と支援が可能となる点を論じた。一方で、学習者の発話におけるエラーの発生やその傾向の把握には依然として課題が残ることも明らかとなった。また、技術的な不具合が発生するリスクも懸念され、オンライン授業における柔軟性と準備の重要性が浮き彫りとなった。本論文は、仮想空間が伝統的な授業とオンライン授業のギャップを埋める効果的な手段として機能する可能性を、さらに明確に示すものである。Gather のような仮想空間は、オンライン授業のマネジメントを容易にし、学習者のパフォーマンス向上に寄与しうる有望なツールであるといえる。ただし、ウェブ会議ツールの進化にも引き続き注目し、それらと併せてオンライン学習環境のさらなる改善を図ることが必要である。