

Rezzable objects in the classroom, or: my first EFL lesson in Second Life

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Task

Mentor said we should pick one out of three themes for the trial lesson with objects. The three were: (a) food&drink, (b) clothing, and (c) leisure. I told the team that as far as I am concerned it didn't really matter all that much which one is finally chosen, as long as I'm allowed to do the pronunciation bit. By popular vote we

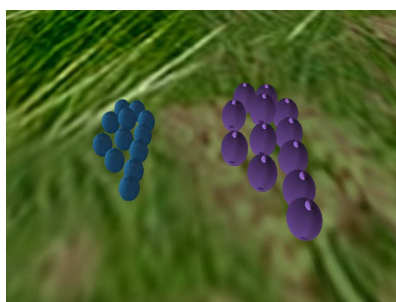
finally settled on food&drink: of universal interest to language learners of all cultures, ages and proficiency levels. I promised to select the vocabulary to use in the lesson.

Vocabulary

Out of many thousands of vocabulary items in English somehow connected with food and drink I was to select a small set, a few dozen, to use in the trial lesson. Criteria: (a) EFL proficiency – lower intermediate, (b) suitable for a variety of activities, (c) common and useful in real communication. Oh, and also – easy to rez. The very first tool which came to a lexicographically conditioned mind is of course an e-dictionary: a subject field search should do it! Not so, at least not in most pedagogical EFL e-dictionaries, as it turned out. The LDOCE4 "nutrition" is not the same as "food&drink"; do I need such words as *calorific*, *carbohydrate*, *cholesterol*, *crash diet*, *dextrose*? Ultimately, CALD did the trick and I landed with a few thousand items. Rezzable? Would that be like imageable/concrete/tangible? Aha – the Paivio imagibility index! Applying this filter and later tweaking yielded twenty-five lexical items ultimately rezzed into 3d in-world objects: *apple pie*, *cherry pie*, *cheese block*, *blueberries*, *cantaloupe*, *cereal*, *cherries*, *coconut*, *corn*, *eggplant*, *grapes*, *green apple*, *ketchup*, *lemon*, *lettuce*, *lime*, *milk*, *orange juice*, *pear*, *toast with butter*, *pork chop*, *red apple*, *rice*, *watermelon*, *yogurt*, *zucchini*.

Objects

I collected the parcel with the objects from Mentor and eagerly went down to the lawn near the LanguageLab car-park in their Business sim to try them out. One by one I dropped them on the ground to be soon surrounded by a veritable grocery store of food and drink objects. Except for



apple pie they all politely said their names on touching in a pleasant female American English voice. I thought *blueberries* were not very different in appearance from *grapes*, and the *green apple* did not look like apple to me, but *toast with butter*, in turn, looked yummy, and *zucchini* was nicely rezzed, too. I touched them all in turn – partly to test that everything was in order,



partly to tune in to the voice, partly to check the pronunciation (*cantaloupe*), partly for sheer fun. The spaces I left between the objects on the ground were a bit too narrow to walk among them without stumbling. But it was too late in the day to rearrange everything. "It will have to make do", I thought, and logged out.

Preparation

The lesson plan called for a phonetic warm-up, then a variety of activities centred on food classification and passive voice (*fruit is grown* but *meat is produced*). The warm-up itself was to be simple and short, a pronouncing activity to familiarize the learners with the vocab, to give them opportunities to practice saying the words, to raise phonetic awareness. I knew I could not afford much more than to lead them to my lawn grocery store, let them play around a little touching the objects to listen to their names, and possibly ask slightly tricky questions, like: *Which foods start with the sound /k/?* or *Which foods end in a voiced sound?* Learners would answer by touching the right objects. We would also do some small talk about who likes what most, of course.

Lesson

And finally they came: *Jokinga, Abdullah, Anatema* and *Hoshy*, lead by their regular teacher, Captain Jaybird, who let us have his class for this trial lesson. How does one pronounce the names? Is it /dʒəʊ-/ or /jəʊ-/? Where's the stress in *Anatema*: second or third syllable? Oh, the joys of teaching a multilingual/multinational/multicultural class! I asked them to introduce themselves to hear the pronunciation, but I hardly remembered, busy manipulating my camera angle and the usual multitude of windows overlaid on the view of the terrain and avatars. One window for IM, with tabs for the Mentor, fellow team teachers, and whoever of the online friends wanted to drop a line at this very inopportune moment. Another window with the notecard holding the vocabulary items in use. One window with the lesson plan – to know what to do next, just in case. The near-speakers window to turn loud ones down and soft ones up. The chat line was also open to drop text there if somebody had audio problems, or simply to reinforce the message (also good for archiving). A low tech piece of paper on the desk by the mouse – to jot down quick notes. A few MSWord documents open concurrently in good old Windows. The muting button on my headset cable to press when my grandpa clock strikes – to avoid confusingly streaming the sound into the world (there's some charm in the out-of-world sounds in SL, however :-). The feats of multitasking!

Go boldly

The Mentor, Head Teacher and a few other auditors were discreetly observing at a distance. Fluweel, full of reserve, was seen among them. What am I doing here, performing a teacher-trainee in front of my own doctoral student?! Bees, Stefi and Misy were getting ready to pick up the lesson after the warm-up, tweaking the whiteboard in the meantime to be able to show some slides. Some other people I'd met in the English Village sim also turned up. Poor learners! To be called on to perform in such



circumstances! But they did. And so did I. With adrenalin pumping like in my first RL lesson thirty years ago, with trembling voice and butterflies all over my stomach, I boldly went where no man had gone before – into the unfathomable chasm of teaching EFL pronunciation with audio-enhanced rezzable objects from the food&drink lexical field in the Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) of Second Life...

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