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English version translated by PDFTranslate_GPT:

Many schools organize a language village every year: a simulated village where students perform language tasks in as realistic situations as possible. On the subject communities, questions about organizing a language village are frequently asked. The Modern Foreign Languages Expertise Center compiled experiences about language villages in the publication "A Language Village Doesn't Speak for Itself" (Van Nieuwenhoven et al., 2008).

Conducting a language village has several advantages:

- Students learn to cope better in everyday conversation situations by practicing in a language village. Working in (almost) lifelike situations increases motivation and has a positive effect both internally and externally for the school.

- A high yield is achieved in a relatively short time. During the practice phase and even during the execution of the language village, students become aware of gaps in their knowledge or skills in real-life communicative situations. This can encourage the learning of new knowledge and skills.

- Students learn from and with each other, as they often perform language tasks in groups.

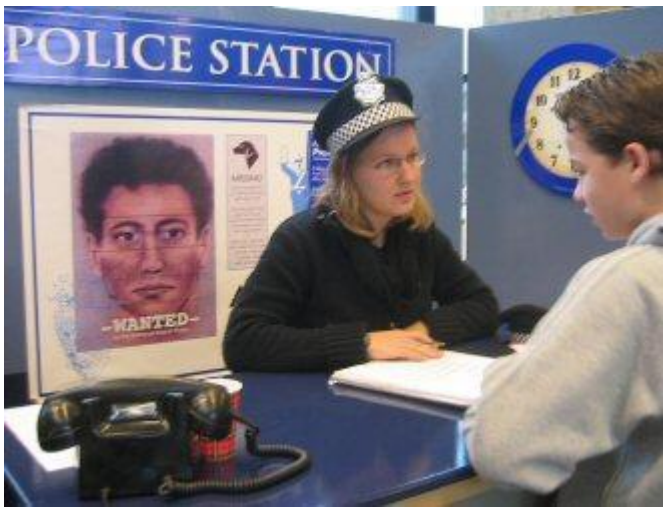
- Students learn (and dare) to make mistakes, especially when the content, not the form, of the message is important.

- Preparing and executing a language village can lead to more collaboration among MFL teachers (when the language village is conducted for multiple languages).

However, the language village also has disadvantages. A key reason for developing a virtual version of the language village was the possibility of investing less time and energy in the annually recurring set construction. Once developed, the virtual village is permanently available and can be expanded as needed. This allows this work and

test format to be used more frequently and flexibly and realized on a larger scale (with multiple schools).

Still, the virtual language village variant requires people to be present as conversation partners and/or evaluators during execution. However, the location-independent dimension of 3D platforms offers more opportunities to involve 'third parties', such as native speakers, competent (former) students, parents, senior students, and other teachers and teachers in training (interns), in the execution of language villages.



The ViTAAL project, Virtual Language Village, was developed to address the disadvantages of language villages and to gain experience with the technical possibilities of virtual worlds in secondary and higher education.

Virtual Language Village

A virtual language village can be described as a village with various locations (such as a bakery, a police station, a museum, a tourist office, a terrace) in a virtual world, intended for practicing and testing conversation skills in a foreign language or the mother tongue. Language learners log into a virtual world, go to the virtual language village, and can have conversations in that virtual language village with each other and with (near-)native speakers of the foreign language, both one-on-one and with multiple people simultaneously. These conversations can be guided or alternated with written chat. In principle, the conversations can be recorded, with a recording option in the software program of the virtual world itself or with an external software program, such as Audacity. This is a free recording program, easy to install, and operates like an old-fashioned cassette deck.

Furthermore, various resources can be offered in the virtual village: students can watch video streams, listen to the radio, and visit external sites provided for them.

To realize a virtual language village, a virtual world is needed. In the ViTAAL project, Active Worlds was used, a virtual world made available by SURF (<www.surf.nl>). Active Worlds runs on an external server accessed by installing a utility program on the school network. Via an account with a username and password, students, teachers, interns, and trainers have access to the virtual language village. For safety reasons, the virtual village is only accessible to students and other project participants.

Development Process

The ViTAAL project developed materials for the first year of VMBO and HAVO/VWO, and for 4 VWO. Thanks to the dedicated and creative efforts of the system administrator of one of the participating schools, the virtual language village was built in French style for the first year, while for 4 VWO, the existing virtual world Titanic was used, supplemented with additional attributes.

On the Titanic, students played a murder game in the form of a language quest, ‘Panique à bord’, leading them in teams to the solution. Although the context of a murder game is not a realistic language task, it was chosen because the playful element was motivating and led to various educational language activities (acquiring information in conversations, reading, listening, giving oral reports).

The choices for conversation locations in the virtual language village and on the Titanic were made based on themes and content from the curriculum used at one of the participating schools and based on 'can-do statements' of the European Reference Framework (ERK) for speaking and conversations (appropriate for the ERK level of students in the first year and the fourth year).

Organizational Tips for Working with a Virtual Language Village

- Train users in advance in working with the virtual world: avatars, space, interaction possibilities, recording conversations.

- Distribute a map of the virtual language village with locations.

- Make VIRtiquette agreements (do not all stand in one heap upon entry).

- Familiarity with each other creates commitment (and safety).

- Plan sufficient contact moments between teacher(s) and students/teacher trainees and between students and pupils.

Experiences

Students and their teachers were enthusiastic about working with a virtual language village and the language quest on the virtual Titanic. In 3D environments, you can offer many different settings for performing authentic professional and task-oriented communicative activities. The experience was that students quickly learned to move in the virtual world during the preparatory technical training.

A surprising advantage was that students could express themselves more easily in the foreign language during the conversations, according to themselves because they could 'hide' behind their avatar (their 3D identity in the form of a digital puppet). As a result, they dared to make mistakes more easily and were more focused on keeping the conversation going. For students, participation in the simulations in the 3D world made the importance of learning a language a less abstract activity. Suddenly, it was very concrete what knowledge and skills were needed to function in situations that required the use of the target language. 'Knowing that you will soon be talking with real French-speaking people in Amsterdam from the teacher training increases the motivation for performing preparatory learning activities in the 'real-life' educational situation in the classroom.

The collaboration between schools and teacher training has proven complex but feasible. That collaboration is conditional (without

students, no language village) but also offers a real win-win situation. Schools are happy with the developed language village lesson material and the contribution to staffing the language village. The training programs can, in turn, improve the quality of their subject didactic curriculum components. Students have the opportunity to gain practical experience in co-designing task-oriented (online) teaching materials and guiding and evaluating learning processes in virtual environments 'on the job'. This allows them to increase their didactic knowledge and behavioral repertoire for speaking skills education. Additionally, collaboration offers training programs the opportunity to conduct practical research and connect the use of instruments such as the ERK and the European Language Portfolio to practical experiences. The students' conversations were recorded and assessed using ERK assessment guidelines and could then be stored in the students' own language portfolio as a basis for further steps in the learning process. Because both students and their teacher trainers and teachers assessed the recorded conversations, the assessor reliability among assessors increased, leading to a more valid measurement of conversation skills.

Organization

When deploying a virtual language village yourself, several questions are important:

- For which students (with what ERK level)?

- With which supervisors (e.g., students)?

- Where (which situations)?

- What is being performed (which language tasks)?

- How is this recorded (e.g., through recorded voice chat and written chat)?

- At what ERK level are conversations assessed?

From the project, we recommend working with four phases. The first phase is the preparation phase, in which language tasks are practiced, technology is installed and explained, and instructions are

given to students, teachers, and interns or seniors about the working method. The second phase is the execution phase. In this phase, the virtual language village is actually carried out. For this, making a good conversation plan between students and teacher trainees is important. The third phase is the evaluation phase. In this phase, conversations are assessed, and the assessment is discussed (between teacher, intern, and if possible, the teacher trainer). In the fourth phase, agreements are made about further learning steps in the learning process of the student and trainee.

Realistic and Safe

The virtual language village can be a valuable addition to language education. It provides variety in the learning environment and places students and trainees in a (almost) realistic situation. Yet, it offers enough safety to learn. Students feel seriously addressed on their language skills and work with their teachers to improve them purposefully. Students learn to guide pupils from their own teacher training. It seems to be an excellent opportunity for more accessible collaboration between schools and teacher training programs.