



The ingredients of learning: interaction, immersion and instruction

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Introduction

Velawoods English is a unique and enjoyable online English-language learning experience in which the learners will be able to develop all their language skills through real-life situations that revolve around them and other characters living in the virtual world of Velawoods™.

The learners are in control of how much time they want to spend learning each day. They can choose to learn through the evolving storyline in Velawoods™ with opportunities arising for language focus and communicative practice. Alternatively, they can practice their skills on their own in their virtual apartment using a range of interactive tools, or practice with other online learners across the world.

This paper summarises some of the key learning theories and principles that have informed the **Velawoods English** unique learning design.

Syllabus

The syllabus and content of **Velawoods English** are based on the same learning programme used in major language schools, which makes learning easier. It has been used by over 1.5 million learners in 113 countries worldwide. The syllabus is tried and tested, carefully graded, and built on communicative objectives linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The vocabulary syllabus was informed by English Vocabulary Profile, a major research project mapping how learners learn vocabulary at different CEFR levels, so learners can be sure that the language they are learning in **Velawoods English** is manageable, useful, logically sequenced and appropriate for their level.

Second language acquisition theory

The **Velawoods English** environment creates the conditions for successful second language learning, which is said to be facilitated by:

- *supplementing comprehensible language which is at the learner's existing level with language which is slightly above that level, also called 'input + 1';*
- *providing adequate time and opportunity for the learner to apply his/her conscious knowledge of relevant linguistic rules to his/her production (as resulting from unconsciously acquired awareness through exposure to the language in context);*
- *and maintaining a low affective filter, i.e. avoiding negative feelings, attitudes and emotional states which may act as barriers to acquisition even if useful linguistic input is available.*

(Krashen, 1982)

These ideas and related research have informed the past thirty years' focus on communicative language teaching, in which a focus on meaning (rather than just form) is paramount if the ultimate goal is proficient communication in real-world contexts.

A communicative approach

Velawoods English endeavours to facilitate natural language acquisition by providing contextualised input and encouraging the learner to negotiate meaning via a series of level-appropriate prompts and interactions. This reflects a communicative approach to language teaching, which typically:

- *emphasises the communication of meaning;*
- *focuses on grammatical forms where necessary to clarify meaning;*
- *exploits contextual cues to make linguistic input simple and comprehensible.*

(Lightbown & Spada, 2006:112-113)

Moreover, in the **Velawoods English** learning experience, spoken communication is only one part of the learning experience. All four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are developed, as well as grammar and vocabulary; and crucially, these are integrated through the achievement of communicative goals, as they are in real life (Nunan, 1989). Learners also receive continuous feedback on their performance in all areas via a weighted scoring system that allows learners to monitor their progress as they complete ‘Missions’ in the virtual environment.

Interaction, immersion and instruction

A constructivist perspective has also been influential in recent language education developments. The argument is that knowledge and meaning are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are co-created through interaction, in which the learner has a very active role to play. Learning is collaborative and operates within a social context. Thus, language develops as a result of social interaction, in which the learner is able to do more with the support of those around them than they would manage independently (Vygotsky, 1978 [1930-34]; Piaget, 1967). This support is often referred to as ‘scaffolding’.

As Kaufman (2004:304) explains,

“Active engagement, pursuit of diverse paths to discovery, concept acquisition, and external and internal scaffolding are central to the learning process.”

In the absence of real human interlocutors, the characters and virtual teacher in the **Velawoods English** learning experience take on the responsibility of scaffolding the learner’s language development. They provide ‘external scaffolding’ by offering simple, comprehensible tasks, a model of language use and feedback on the learner’s performance. ‘Internal scaffolding’ is achieved by means of the learner’s self-reflection and monitoring of his/her performance while moving through the environment and completing a range of engaging comprehension and production tasks. Task scripts are written and activities constructed to afford a kind of ‘rehearsal’ of spoken interaction which guides the learner towards natural production in a real-world context.

An immersive environment has numerous advantages for language learning, not least of all its affordance of a “genuine, immediate need to learn the language” and concomitant boost to learner motivation and progress; but there is a need for guided instruction, too (Lightbown and Spada, 2006:193). This will complement the stimulating nature of the learner’s surroundings with the necessary support for deeper comprehension and accuracy in production.

In the **Velawoods English** learning experience, the learner experiences this combination of immersion and instruction through interaction with virtual characters and the guidance of a supportive virtual tutor to help derive meaning from the use of language in the surrounding context. Thus, the learner does not feel alone, despite the self-study nature of the course and the related risk of feeling isolated or demotivated that may happen with online-only learning (Marsh, 1997; Hurd, 2008).

Noticing

A key element of the **Velawoods English** learning experience which illustrates its ‘immerse + instruct’ approach is the affordance of opportunities for learners to ‘notice’ features of language used by others, before going on to meet this language again and attempt to reproduce it accurately. In second language acquisition theory, noticing is a necessary part of the acquisition process and occurs when learners focus their attention on the discrepancy between what they are currently able to produce and what is being produced in the (higher-level) linguistic environment around them. Having noticed a gap in their proficiency, they can begin to fill it. Moreover, it is important that learners have “sufficient processing space available to hold both versions in memory and compare them” (Adams, 2003:349).

In **Velawoods English**, learning is facilitated through noticing. The learner is immersed in the target language environment, while also being regularly encouraged to engage with the learning opportunities it affords. The learner moves through the environment by completing ‘Missions’, which are structured in a way that allows him/her first to hear or encounter the target language in a context that helps make the meaning clear, before later using it. The learner is encouraged to notice the language through activities, or by being prompted by a ‘teacher in your pocket’ who moves unobtrusively through the virtual environment with the learner, prompting him/her to pay attention to salient features of language at opportune moments. Once the language has been introduced and practised through scaffolded interaction, the learner is encouraged to use the language in new communicative interactions before the end of the ‘Mission’.

Feedback and assessment

In **Velawoods English**, learning is facilitated by ongoing feedback. Every activity is weighted for coverage of Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary and Grammar and the learner can access their scores at any time. For completion of a course, learners are given a certificate of completion.

In **Velawoods English**, there are also a number of Tests available. There is a skills-based assessment at the end of each part of the course, and a more substantial Test at the end of each course that links to internationally recognised qualifications.

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