THE BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL REALITY
LEARNING FOR ADULT ESL STUDENTS

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Any ESL teacher who has taught abroad will tell you that getting adult students to engage during class is one of the hardest goals to achieve, but there can be several underlying factors connected to this engagement issue including:

- Lack of interest or motivation
- Self-consciousness and performance anxiety
- Lack of connection to the content

In this article, we will take a look at these potential problems, discuss why **virtual reality (VR)** may be a viable solution, and how you might bring VR into your ESL classroom.
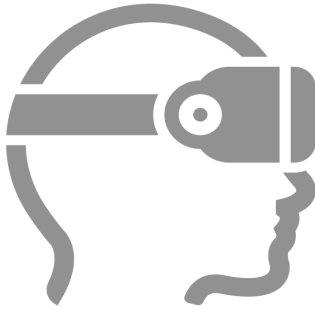
Why is VR a potential win for young adult learning?

During my second semester of teaching, I started to hear students use the phrase "Winner, winner, chicken dinner!" I was shocked to hear such a dated and unusual expression from my Chinese students! "Where in the world are you getting that language from?" I asked them.

Photo by: Jacob Lund Photography

I found out it is a popular catch-phrase used by video game players of the world famous, first-person shooter game Battlegrounds. Fans of the game can also learn how to pronounce other English phrases, read English in game chat, and distinguish weapon, player, or reward names. Today's students are much more connected to the digital world than a few generations ago. Computer games, mobile games, streaming media, social media, etc., can initiate learners into a new language learning environment.

With the success of learning English that comes with gaming, **VR learning** should not be restricted to the classroom.

As adults are cognitively matured, it has the ability to extend to self-directed learning, workforce training and situation management which can aid in cultivating lifelong learners {8}. The technology can serve any adult ESL facilitator as a tool against the lack of motivation, anxiety, the negating of continued learning, and intracultural resentment {7}.

1. VR Can Increase Motivation / Decrease Anxiety

The hunger to learn and improve language skills can quickly dissolve from the first day of class because of the repetitiveness created in the learning process. To help maintain this motivation, Keller's {3} ARCS-V model describes important learning factors of attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction, and volition for effective learning to take place. VR can introduce young adult students to real world concepts (building attention, relevance, and confidence in learning) in a way that standard instruction does not {1}. In gamifying learning, it can create a motivated and competitive mindset to be the best which can also sustain the effort of students in studying more or developing habits of self-directed learning.

Students are also motivated to focus more on the task at hand and succumb less to the learning barriers created by their insecurities. Learners who are able to overcome these obstacles and maintain their goal-oriented intentions tend to employ volitional or self-regulatory strategies that help them stay on task {3}. The focus for the student with VR is exploring, strategizing, and learning from mistakes to "win the game" which greatly decreases the amount of brain energy spent on those fears and insecurities.

VR tools also give the facilitator an advantage in reducing or eliminating external and internal distractions. External distractions can consist of cell phones, other students, or gazing out the window.

Internal factors can consist of self-confidence revolving around their comfortability with the material or self-consciousness in what other students may think of their skill level. VR creates an almost anxiety-free learning environment while the learner is immersed in a digital world by lessening anxiety and embarrassment of making mistakes in the classroom {1}.

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2. VR Can Promote Self-Directed Learning

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Another advantage of VR ESL learning is creating the desire for **self-directed learning** {2}. Self-directed learning refers to the learner realizing the importance of what knowledge is needed to accomplish a task and continuing to seek information after the lesson.

With VR, learners have the capability to self-direct their learning. Self-directed learning can contribute to increased ownership of their learning and engagement {6}. They take charge of their learning adventure while enhancing their real-time problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

An ESL student may also feel more engaged in a VR environment because they have more control over their immediate learning {6}. They explore the scenario and their skill rather than listening to lecture-based material or practicing dialogue with uninterested class partners. Augmented Reality (AR) gives students of any age the chance to travel virtually and visit historical landmarks, famous museums like the Louvre, and walk the streets of popular cities worldwide.

3. VR Can Create Meaning and Cultural Awareness

Since the early 1990s, research has reported positive effects of VR regarding how "immersive simulations have promoted constructivist learning and student engagement through participation, self-monitoring and evaluation" {7}.

In creating an environment where learners build f meaning through experience and where the student is learning by doing {3}, we can develop students who are intercultural speakers who can navigate their inter-relationships while understanding and valuing their own cultural identity {7}. Not only can they explore other cultures, they can promote their own.

Photo by: Jacob Lund Photography

What challenges do ESL teachers face with VR?

While VR offers many benefits, there are some barriers for adoption. Luckily, as the technology continues to expand with more availability and less budget restrictions, ESL teachers have several options to choose from that can balance quality and budget.

Photo by: winnievenzince

VR options for your environment

Some popular **VR** options that have been implemented in young adult classrooms today are both Virtual Speech and Mondly VR language learning (*Video 1*) which place students in simulated real-life situations to enhance the immersion experience. The simulations are practical, although subscription price may dissuade students from long-time use.

For more affordable options, Google Cardboard allows students to use their phones as a **VR** headset in conjunction with Google 360°. There are also tutorials on how to make your own VR headsets for use with your phone which is a great creative exercise to perform with your students practicing listening skills during a step-by-step process.

Playstation VR could also be a great option for students already familiar with console gaming components. It has a growing number of scenarios, including a trip to the moon, and works with 360° video streaming services such as YouTube.

Video 1: Mondly Languages (2021)

The future of VR in adult ESL learning

VR technology has advanced rapidly over the past 35 years pushing institutions worldwide to re-evaluate their teaching strategies. As younger students grow into adults, familiarity with game-type learning within **VR** will be a much more popular option for adult language learning and beneficial to teachers as it promotes imagination, immersion, and interactivity {8}.

The **VR** experiences your adult ESL students have today could help them succeed in the technology world of tomorrow.

Photo by: Jacob Lund Photography

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