Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live Online

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5ᵗʰ Evaluation Report based on an

"AVALON Post-Course-Survey and Participants' Interviews"

December 2010

Foreword

Within this report a comparison of demonstrative quantitative data from the post-course-survey and qualitative data from the participants' interviews is intended. This should offer a summarized overview of the results.

Based on the results of the Expert interviews[1] a pre-course and a post-course-survey[2] for participants were developed. The pre-course-survey serves as a "check-in" in order to get contact details and general information about the participants which is relevant for the teachers. The post-course-survey evaluates the course and supports or refutes certain assumptions concerning quality criteria with respect to language learning in Second Life. We sent out invitations to the post-course-survey to 240 participants of certain AVALON Language courses. 51 people replied to the survey and 41 from these were completed and therefore valid answers that could be used for this Evaluation report. On the basis of this forgone survey and the corresponding evaluation report[3] a qualitative interview schedule for participants[4] was developed and 8 participants from the Business English course were interviewed. These interviews gave a more detailed insight in certain thematic issues which arose during the analysis of the previous participants' post-course-survey. A 4th Avalon evaluation report was produced in which the statements of the interviews were summarized.

This report should now offer a summarized overview of the quantitative and the qualitative evaluation data in combination. Therefore it is addressed to the project partners providing feedback on their work. In addition it serves as a useful orientation for teachers who would like to start teaching in Second Life.

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[1] http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33804693/Evaluation-Reports

[2] http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31646829/Surveys

[3] http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33804693/Evaluation-Reports

[4] http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31645196/Interview-guidelines

# Content

General Information

Language learning background and first experiences in Second Life

Within the post-course-survey it turns out that for 26 of the 41 respondents the AVALON course was the first online learning course they had ever taken part in. Therefore it is not really surprising that except from 4 people the participation in the AVALON course also represents their first contact with Second Life. During the interviews the respondents explained that they do have experienced "offline learning courses before" for example at University, Volkshochschule or other institutions, too. But the Avalon Language Course constitutes the first *online* learning course the interviewees have ever taken part in and at the same time the Avalon project was the motive to get in touch with Second Life for the first time. These are the corresponding graphics from the post-course-survey:

Was this the first time you have attended an online learning course?

- Yes (26)
- No (15)

37%

63%
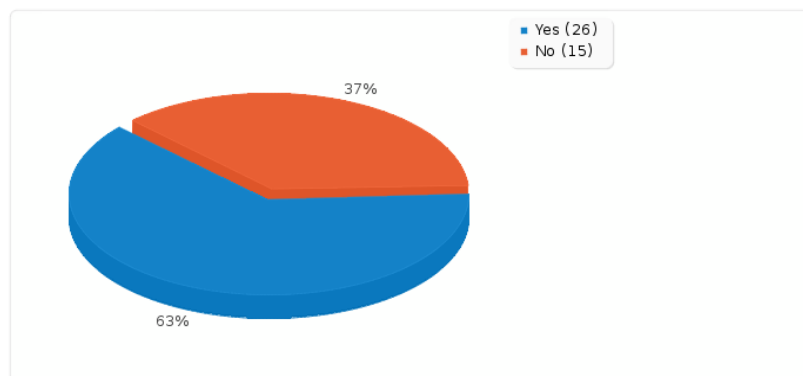
Was this the first time you have entered Second Life?

- Yes (22)
- No (19)

46%

54%
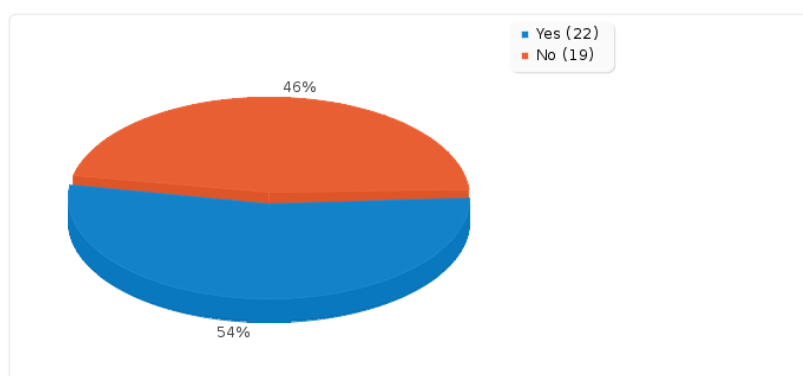
Technical aspects

The interviews contained additional questions to the ones in the post-course-survey in order get more detailed and personal information from the participants. When asked about their first steps in Second Life various answers were given during the interviews: the majority remembered the virtual world as "fascinating", "interesting" and "huge" when they first entered. Apart from one person the participants all indicated that they had problems dealing with the technique (e.g. microphone, moving the avatar etc.) as well as with the orientation in Second Life at the beginning. But the majority also shares the opinion that with the help of the "orientation lesson" and the constant information and advices from the teacher they were soon able to cope with Second Life and the technique. The statistic from the survey supports these statements, too:

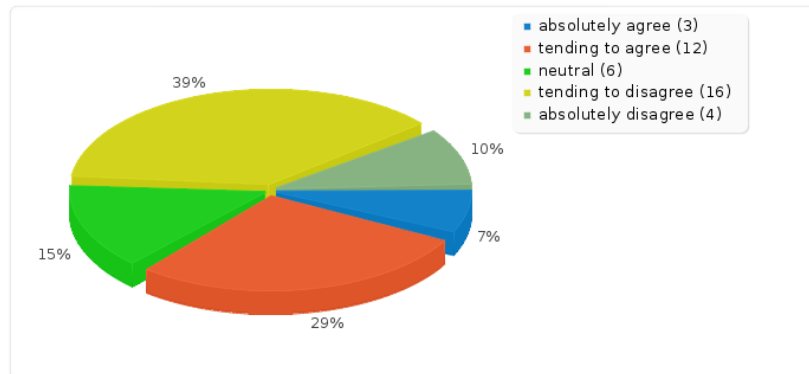**"At the beginning I had difficulties with the handling of Second Life".**
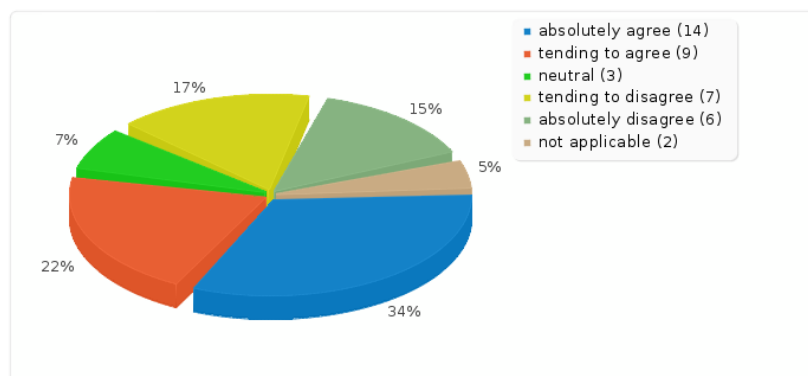
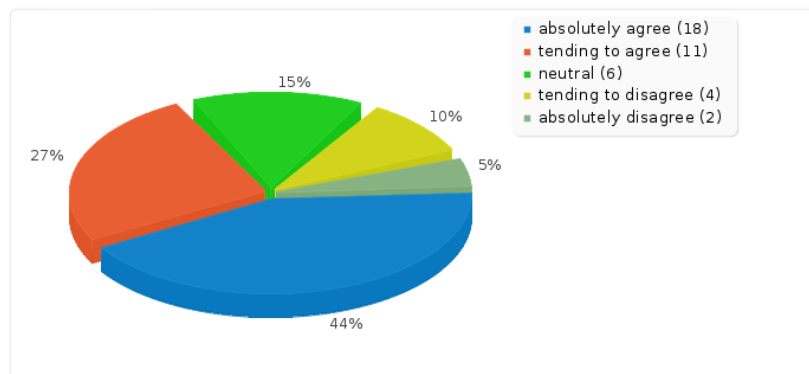**"After the second session I felt quite comfortable with Second Life and my avatar".**
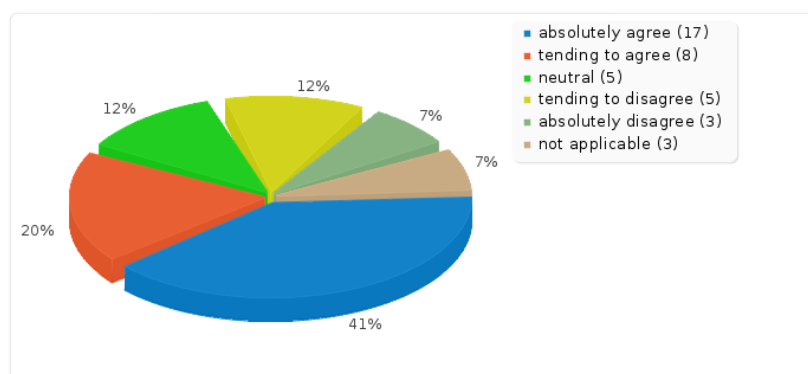
Within the survey the students were asked to answer some questions concerning

technical aspects and the environment. The questions were about the handling of Second Life in general and if the students felt comfortable with Second Life as a learning environment and with their avatars. Besides the students had to judge sound quality, their equipment and the technical skills which are demanded for attending a language course in Second Life.

"I often had problems correctly understanding what other people were saying".

absolutely agree (3)
tending to agree (12)
neutral (6)
tending to disagree (16)
absolutely disagree (4)

39%
10%
7%
15%
29%

"My equipment (computer, internet) was well capable of running Second Life".

absolutely agree (18)
tending to agree (11)
neutral (6)
tending to disagree (4)
absolutely disagree (2)

15%
10%
5%
27%
44%

"Using Second Life as a language learning platform demands many technical skills".

absolutely agree (5)
tending to agree (10)
neutral (11)
tending to disagree (12)
absolutely disagree (3)

29%
7%
12%
27%
24%
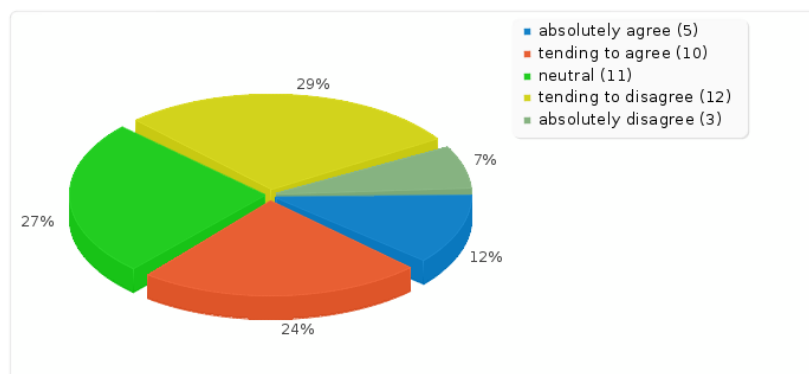
The results of this part in the survey show that there were more students who

obviously had difficulties with the handling of Second Life than students who could easily manage the first steps in Second Life. Referring to this first question it has to be explored why these 25 students (56%) had difficulties with the handling of Second Life at the beginning of the course. This relates to another question in this section where the participants should rate the demanded technical skills that are needed to attend a language learning course within Second Life. 37% assessed that many technical skills are required for attending a language learning course within Second Life. About 15 students assumed the opposite; they obviously judged the level of demanded technical skills as acceptable in this connection.

Game character?

Within the interviews one person explained that her first steps in Second Life felt like a computer game to her and that it was quite funny meeting people and watching them trying to fly or move for example. In the survey it was also asked about the assumed game character of Second Life:

"Learning a language in Second Life feels like a game".
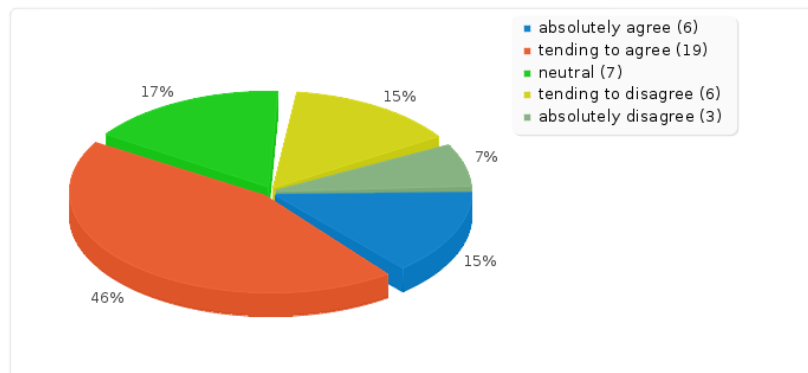
From this statement it should be inferred if Second Life is considered to be a form of game. 46% tended to agree with this statement and 15% absolutely agreed with the statement, altogether 61%. However, 39% were not convinced that it was like a game.

Expectations and motivations

Asked about their expectations and motivations for attending a Business English

course in Second Life the interviewees agreed upon the "package" of improving the language and at the same time getting to know Second Life. Two of the interviewed persons were concretely interested in getting familiar with the teaching situation in Second Life because they are doing research in this field respectively would also like to use it for teaching sooner or later. Furthermore the participants were curious about what would be possible in Second Life and meeting new people. They also appreciated the chance of hearing and talking English at least once in a week and thus refreshing their (business-) vocabulary and pronunciation.

Within the survey the participants were asked to rate how important certain issues were for their motivation to participate. These are the statistics from the two reasons that came up in the survey as well as in the interviews:

"Learning the language"
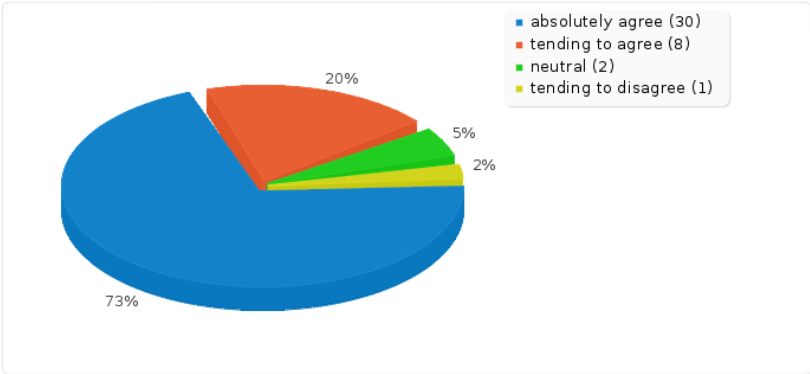
"Getting to know Second Life (better)"
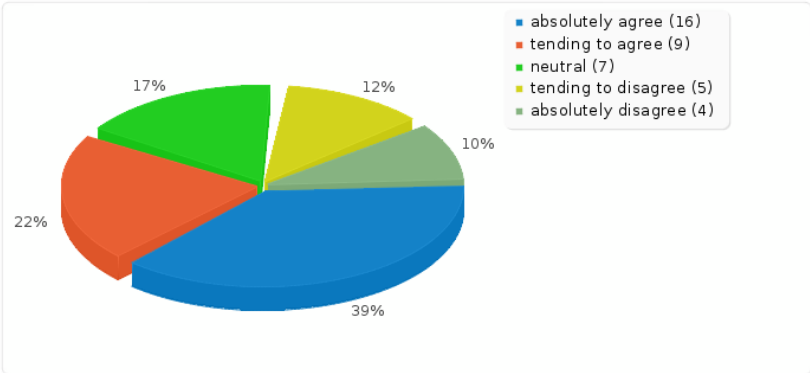
The issue which was obviously most important for the students was "learning the language". Nearly all the students 38 out of 41 rated this issue as very important for

their motivation to participate and agreed with this statement. For only one student it was not that important; learning a language was maybe not the main reason for attending one of these courses. In these context 25 students wanted to get to know Second Life better, 9 students did not rate this aspect as beneficial for their motivation.

The course

The second category of the interview deals with the course. The interviewees were asked if there have been any special learning scenarios or tasks that seemed very helpful to their learning progress. Unfortunately most of the participants couldn't remember any special tasks anymore. Below you find some remembered scenarios which were described as helpful from learners:

- Doing job interviews

- Watching videos about how to apply and doing a good / bad interview

- An own business project they had to work out in a group

- Presentation of the projects

It appears that the tasks and scenarios that were remembered and described by the participants all had to do with active communication and practicing the language as well as presenting themselves in business situations.

During the course the participants came in touch with working on their own, doing group-work as well as teacher-led parts. In the interview they were asked which of these scenarios seemed most productive to them. All interviewees agreed on "group-work" as their favorite learning scenario mainly because of the following reasons:
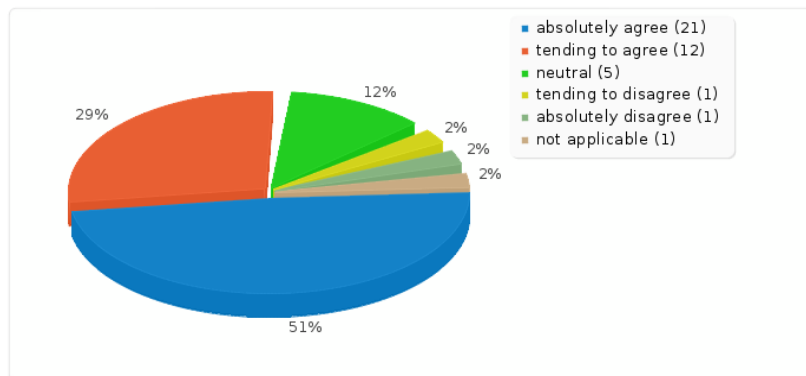
- "[…] because you had to talk more than in the teacher led parts were you could only listen most of the time."

- "Within the group-work there were always discussion parts were everybody had to take part in and talking is one of the most important things to do in a language course"

- "We had to do group-work with changing partners and afterwards there was a discussion with the whole group and the teacher. It was interesting because you talk to people from different cultures and that is a good practice."

- "Group work was more productive because it easier to talk in smaller groups. There were not so many technical problems then."

- "The discussion with the other people was more productive because the most

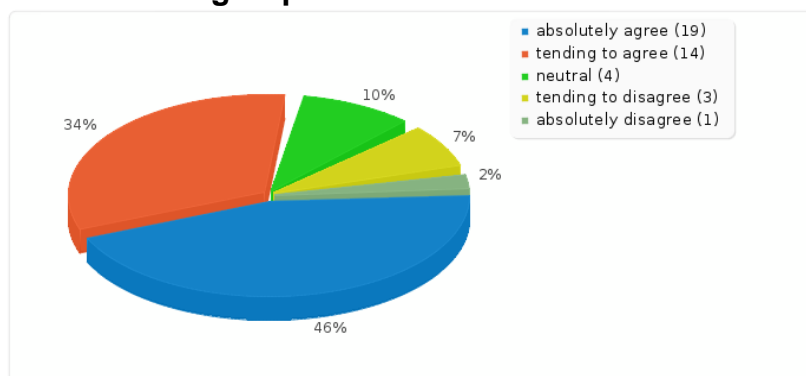things the teacher told us were about the technical things".

One interviewee indicated that it was the mixture between the teacher-led part and the working in groups: the group-work was always communicative but sometimes problematic because of missing vocabulary and within the teacher-led parts they got to know new words.

Within the survey the students were asked to rate certain issues as "particularly helpful and beneficial to their learning progress". The results were very similar to those from the interviews:

The teacher-led-lessons in Second Life

- absolutely agree (21)
- tending to agree (12)
- neutral (5)
- tending to disagree (1)
- absolutely disagree (1)
- not applicable (1)

29%
12%
2%
2%
2%
51%

The group activities in Second Life

- absolutely agree (19)
- tending to agree (14)
- neutral (4)
- tending to disagree (3)
- absolutely disagree (1)

34%
10%
7%
2%
46%

My personal preparation for the coming lesson
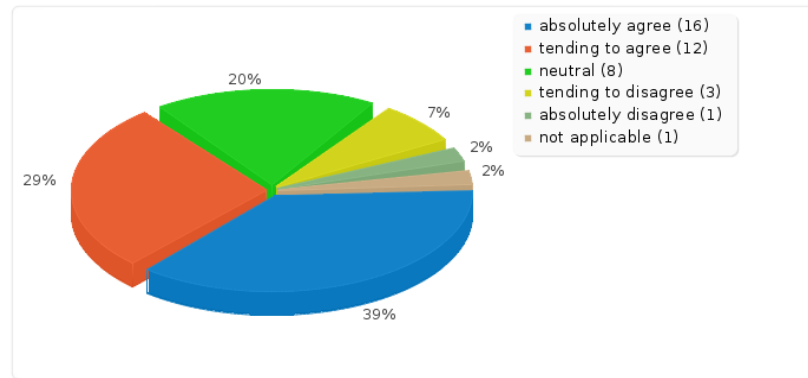
Within this group of questions the "teacher-led-lessons" and the "group activities" turned out to be most helpful and beneficial to the learning process of the participants. 33 people "absolutely agreed" or "tended to agree" that these two issues had a positive influence on their learning progress. More than half of the respondents (28 each) also rated the "personal preparation for the coming lesson" as helpful and beneficial.

Learning in Second Life – Differences and aspects

Within the survey the participants had to agree or disagree with the statement if "learning a language in Second Life differs from learning a language in any other online learning scenario":

"Learning a language in Second Life differs from learning a language in any other online learning scenario".
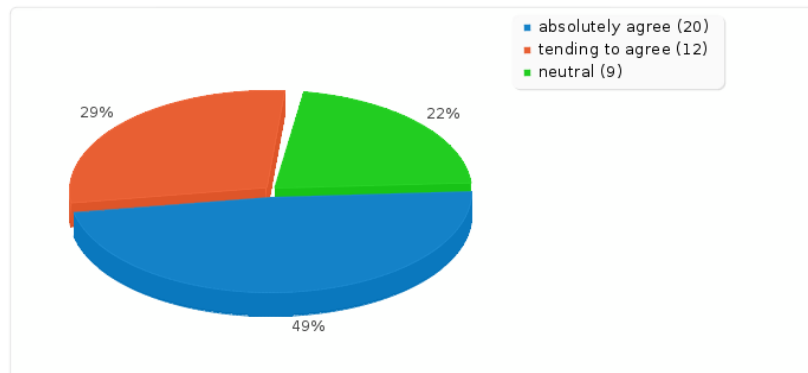
Almost half of the students who answered the survey rated learning a language in Second Life as different compared to other online learning scenarios. The fact that the courses take place in a 3D environment where each participant is able to act through an avatar offers the possibility of a range of options not available in other spaces. Second Life offers you the chance of acting, moving and talking through an avatar. In addition the AVALON language courses in Second Life are supported by text and voice chat. Voice chat has the advantage of getting in direct interaction with other participants. All these options may have contributed to this clear result. Nobody disagreed with the statement, although 9 out of 41 students feel neutral about the statement.

During the participants' interviews the respondents were also asked to compare learning in Second Life to other learning they have done before and judge the main differences. They were asked *if* it differs from learning a language in other online learning scenarios and if yes, in which aspects. Because the interviewees partly gave very personal answers to this question it was decided to depict them as quotes in this report. Here are a few statements concerning "learning in Second Life":

- "I think the biggest difference is that I have access to different cultures and

that I meet people from different cultures and this is very interesting […] and in your real life you don't have so many chances to meet people from other cultures unless you travel a lot."

- "You have the possibility to always access native speakers if you want – just by teleporting".

These aspects came up autonomous during the interviews but they have already been an issue within the forgone survey. The participants had to agree or disagree with the following statement:

"The possibility to teleport yourself to places where your target-language is spoken is one of the biggest advantages within a Second Life language learning scenario".
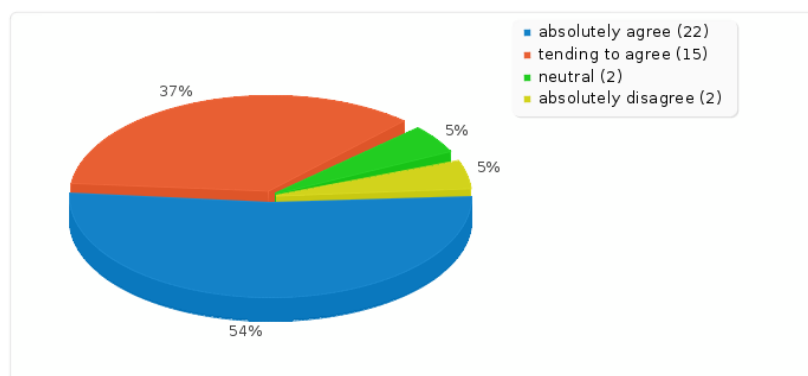

One of the advantages that Second Life offers as a learning environment is to move yourself virtually to other places. When learning a language it can be a great advantage to e.g. visit a virtual Spain while you are learning Spanish. "On location" you can meet native speakers and try out newly learned words and phrases and potentially have real conversations with other people.

The answers are quite convincing: 37 from 41 students agreed with the statement that teleporting to places where you can speak the target language is one of the biggest advantages within a Second Life language learning scenario. Only 2 participants (5%) absolutely disagreed with this statement.

A next aspect that came up during the interview was the possibility to "be mobile" when learning in Second Life:

- "You can learn from everywhere and you don't have to travel to a school."

- "Second Life is free space. It is a new chance for people to study language and improve it."

Within the survey the participants rated "being mobile" as follows:
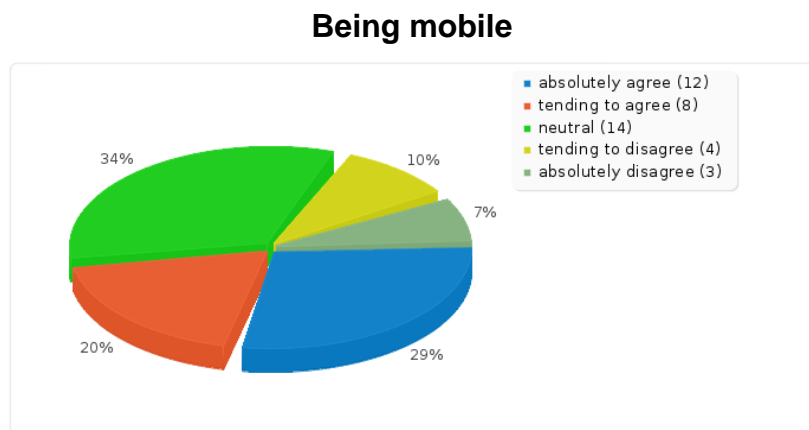
Being mobile

The fact that the students were able to access Second Life from different places as well as being able to freely move inside Second Life added up to the result of the item "being mobile": besides 14 students (34%) felt neutral about this, 20 regarded this advantage as helpful within the learning process and their motivation in general.

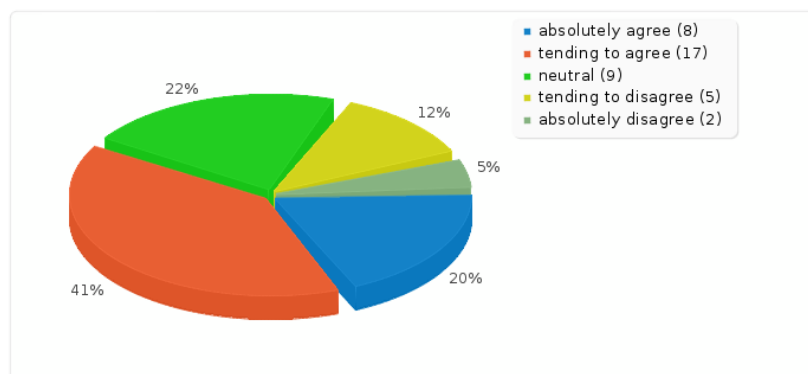Another survey category dealt with "concentration" and "technical problems". These were also aspects that were raised by the participants within the interviews when asked to compare learning in Second Life to other learning they have done before. Here are a few statements concerning this issue:

- "I would say the main difference is that the setting is so special in Second Life that it needs a lot of attention".
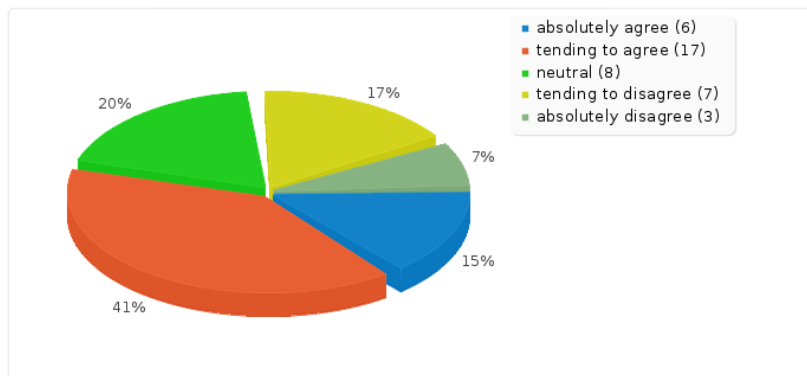
- "It was a little bit a pity that we had to care so much for the technical problems that at least half of the lessons went with "can you hear me, can you hear me? Please come over!"

- "[…] getting along properly with the technology is the biggest challenge"

- "I think didn't pay complete attention to the course. When you're sitting at home in front of a computer, working with a computer the whole day, I was really tired in the evening and I was listening but not really concentrating."

- "The representation as an avatar gives you the possibility to not be so involved if you don't want to, but this could be regarded as a negative or positive aspect."

Varied statements concerning "concentration" and "technical problem" should also be rated within the post-course-survey:

**"It was easy to concentrate during the course".**

"There were not many distractions in the virtual environment".

- absolutely agree (6)
- tending to agree (17)
- neutral (8)
- tending to disagree (7)
- absolutely disagree (3)

With the help of these two questions concerning the concentration and the possible distractions in the virtual environment the general atmosphere during a course can be evaluated. The two pie charts for these questions look approximately the same: the majority of respondents tended to agree or absolutely agreed with these statements. This means that it was not difficult for them to concentrate during course and that there were not many distractions in the virtual world. Altogether this constitutes a very positive feedback for the AVALON Learning Island and the way the courses were set up.

"Technical problems disturbed the learning process constantly".

- absolutely agree (9)
- tending to agree (14)
- neutral (10)
- tending to disagree (6)
- absolutely disagree (2)
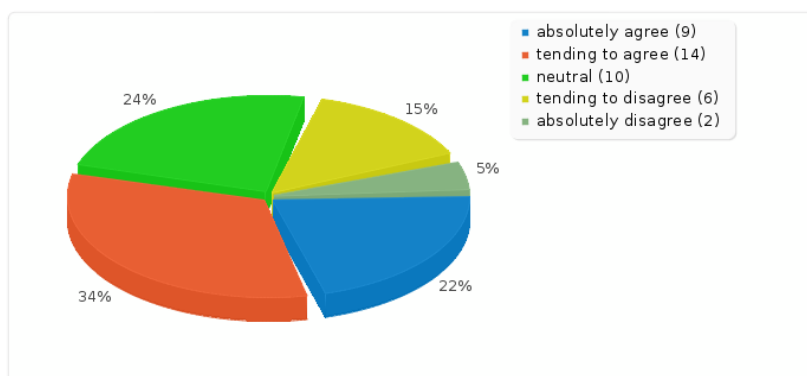
Technical problems in Second Life are not something that teachers and learners can afford to take lightly. Within this question it was asked whether the participants had the feeling that their learning process was constantly disturbed by technical problems or not. The majority of respondents indicate that technical problems disturbed their learning process constantly. At least 10 people felt neutral about this theme and even 6 people tended to disagree with this statement.

Avatars

An avatar is the graphical representation of a user that is used in any kind of virtual role playing games. Within SL every user has the possibility to appear through his/her own individual avatar. The specific appearance, the clothes as well as some selected animations are modifiable by each user. The avatar is the visual image that creates engagement. Generally an avatar is not going to make the language learning as such better or worse, but the idea of engagement, communication and overcoming inhibitions plays a distinctive role.

During the participants' interviews the respondents were asked five questions about how acting and learning with an avatar felt like. At first they should describe a special situation or a certain experience they have had with their avatar on the AVALON Learning Island. Half of the interviewed persons described that they remember some problems they have had with the look of their avatar and that this lead to funny situations: one respondent wanted to change the cloths of his avatar but after taking it of he didn't know how to put something on again – so he was running around naked for a while and felt relieved that this happened after and before he had to go to the course. A similar thing happened to another interviewee who has had a bald head under the cap her avatar was wearing. Though she had to go to the course with her bald head she explained that she didn't felt embarrassed at all "because it was just the avatar and not me". One person had funny problems with the ambiguity of her avatars name – so she simply created a new one. All interviewees indicated that it was amusing for them to explore how their avatar works and also watch others how they practice to fly, walk or try to sit down. Furthermore each of the interviewees got lost somewhere for at least one time.

In addition the respondents were asked how talking and acting through an Avatar felt like during the course. Here are a few statements:

- "It felt very natural in a way."

- "At the beginning funny, because there have been people who did not know how to write or speak."

- "I was not a fan at the beginning, because it was like a copy of myself is talking, but after a while I tried to be myself."

- "It felt much closer as if you would meet someone in skype, because you share the same environment and you see it."

- "Quite okay. It was easier to listen to an avatar, because it was easier to see some kind of a person and not only hearing a voice."

Within the survey the participants also had to agree or disagree to certain statements concerning their experiences and feelings with their avatar. These were the results:

## "Acting and speaking through Avatars made the learning situation feel more real".
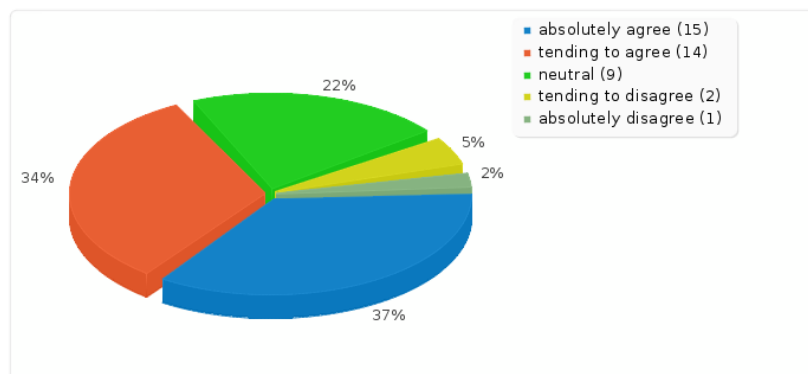
Avatars are one of the core features that a tool like Second Life as a learning environment offers to the participants. For a lot of students it is a great advantage to act through avatars in the 3D environment. They feel more comfortable using a virtual "character". Altogether there were 29 out of the 41 students who considered the learning situation as more real when acting and speaking through an avatar. The fact that so many students rated the existence of avatars as the reason for making the learning situation feel more real can be regarded as positive for the learning situation and of course the progress. Only 3 respondents disagreed with the statement and 9 felt neutral.

"Talking to my "virtual classmates" felt like talking to a computer".
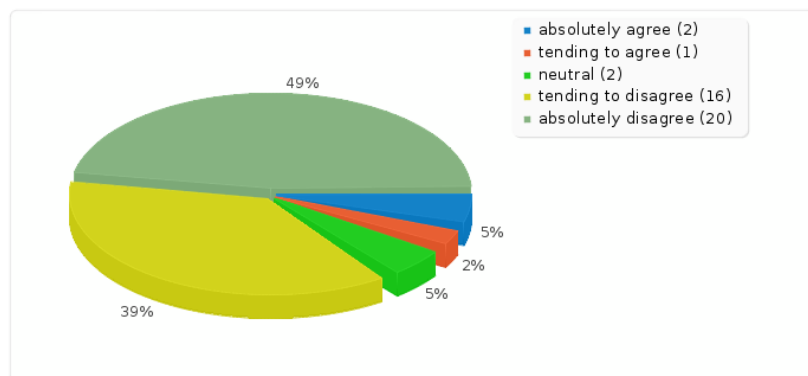
Almost half of the students who answered the survey (49%) absolutely disagreed with this statement, 39% tend to disagree with it. This means that 36 from a total of 41 students regarded themselves as acting and talking through a virtual figure to other virtual representations of people and did not see themselves as talking to a computer. In spite of the game-like aspect of Second Life, the participants obviously consider the interactions in the virtual environment as natural. Two students (5%) felt like talking to a computer. At this point it would be interesting to ask them why it felt like talking to a computer.

Has this Second Life course made you feel more / less / no difference comfortable communicating in the target language?
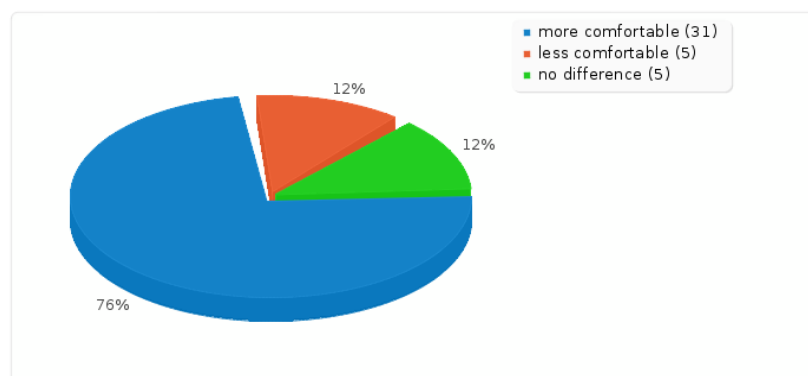
Through this question the assumed added value of learning a language in Second Life should be supported or rejected. It is assumed that communicating in a foreign language could be easier in a more anonymous setting like Second Life than it is in a face-to-face situation. The majority of the respondents (31) shared the opinion that

their participation in the AVALON course made them feel more comfortable communicating in the target language. For 5 people their participation in the course had no influence on their feeling concerning communicating in a foreign language. 5 other respondents indicate that their course in Second Life made them feel less comfortable communicating in the target language.

Avatar and personal learning situation

Within the last question in this theme complex the interviewees were asked if they think that speaking through an avatar could make it easier to overcome inhibitions as to speak a foreign language. Through the avatar many users feel more freely because it's the avatar that is acting and they are willing to experiment much more than they would in real life. In some cases students who are shy in real life would probably feel more protected in case of making mistakes. On the other hand self-reliant students could feel a little bit alienated and lost in the virtual world because of missing "real" physical contacts. Here are a few statements:

- "For those who are too shy talking in English it's easier to talk through an avatar because there is no direct eye contact."

- "Maybe it helps you to concentrate a little bit more on what you are saying when you don't have to look at any persons."

- "Maybe it is sometimes a little bit more embarrassing when someone watches you directly."

- "It does not make so much difference if the other person is sympathetic to you or not. The spoken word is more important."

- "I don't know the situation of others. But for me the first time I talked in Second Life I did feel a bit nervous like in real life. But I've heard from others that for example shy people it helps them to overcome their shyness and speak more freely than in real life."

- "Generally the fear of talking in another language it not an issue for me – there is no difference at all, compared to an offline course."

- "Yes, for some people it is more helpful and comfortable talking through an avatar".

- Maybe it could... because it's a playful environment where you are anonymous and you don't need to talk."
- "It was an advantage, because no one had to be afraid of his accent or look."

- "Not really. Because you have to press the button before you want to say something. This pressing the button is another barrier."

- "It was sometimes good that the avatar was talking instead of standing in front of the professor in real life, but it was strange hearing myself talking".

Within the post-course-survey the participants were also asked directly if they agree with the statement that "Speaking through an avatar made it easier to overcome inhibitions" (as to speak a foreign language in front of the class): "Speaking through an avatar made it easier to overcome inhibitions (e.g. speak in the target-language in front of the class)".
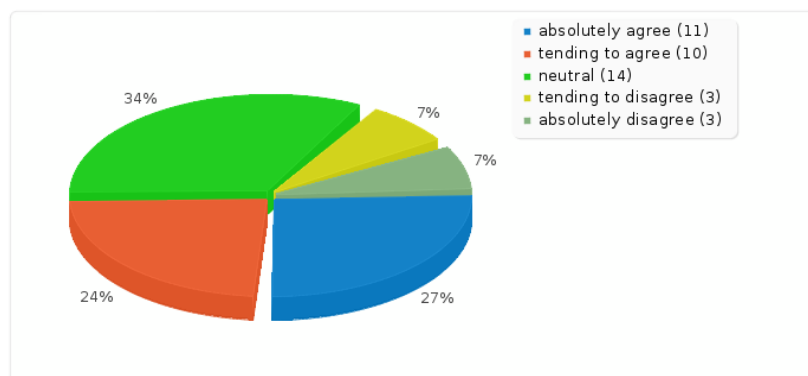
With the help of this question we can decide whether the usage of an avatar made it easier to overcome inhibitions in terms of speaking in a foreign language in front of

the class etc. or not. The majority of participants felt neutral about that statement. That could be because those did not pay attention to this issue during the course, or perhaps they are seasoned language learners who realise that making an effort to speak is essential to make progress in learning language However, 11 respondents absolutely agreed and 10 respondents tended to agree with the statement. This leads to the conclusion that speaking through an avatar is still beneficial for the process of gaining more self-confidence in the sense of speaking in a foreign language.

Anonymity

Generally in a virtual world like Second Life it is possible to maintain anonymity so that nobody really knows about your person. It is not necessary to give out any personal details of your life. You can choose your name, your look – your complete appearance.

This leads to the question if this kind of anonymity is wanted or rather not. Is it necessary to know the person behind the avatar or is it irrelevant for the process of learning a language? So the interviewees were asked if it was more important to stay anonymous behind their avatar or if they felt the desire to let their classmates know who they are in real life or get to know who they are in real life. The given answers varied pretty much:

- "I felt quite good with the anonymity"

- "[…] there are so many people in Second Life and they have different expectations about Second Life and I don't want to know all strangers and their situation or let them know my real name. But I mean for the colleagues it is okay."

- "It was interesting to have two "characters". There is a difference between the avatar you see and the real person behind this avatar."

- "Anonymity was not an issue because only learning English was important – you don't always stay in contact with the other participants after the course."

- "I wanted to let the others know who I really am, because I'm a teacher, too. I wanted people to know my website, my blog etc.

- "I knew some people from the course before so it was not an issue."

- "If I would explore Second Life by my own and not as a student in a course, then I would really like the anonymity. Like that it's the opposite of facebook."

- "I liked the anonymity at the beginning, later I sometimes wanted talk with the people in real life."

- "I did not want to stay anonymous, it felt strange to me."

Within the post-course-survey the participants were also asked how important "staying anonymous" was for them and furthermore if it was important for them "letting the other students know who they are in real life":

"Staying anonymous was important".
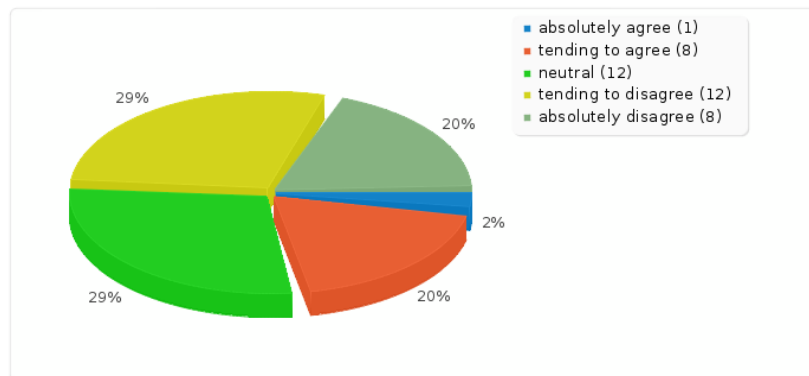
The majority of participants felt neutral about the possibility of being anonymous behind the avatar in Second Life. Just the same amount of respondents (12) "tended to disagree" that staying anonymous was important for them. 8 people even "absolutely disagreed" with that statement while for other 8 people staying anonymous was an issue and they "tended to agree" that it was important for them. It can be assumed that for the respondents the possibility to stay anonymous in Second Life was not a crucial factor for taking part in the AVALON course.

"It was important letting the other students know who I really am (in real life)".
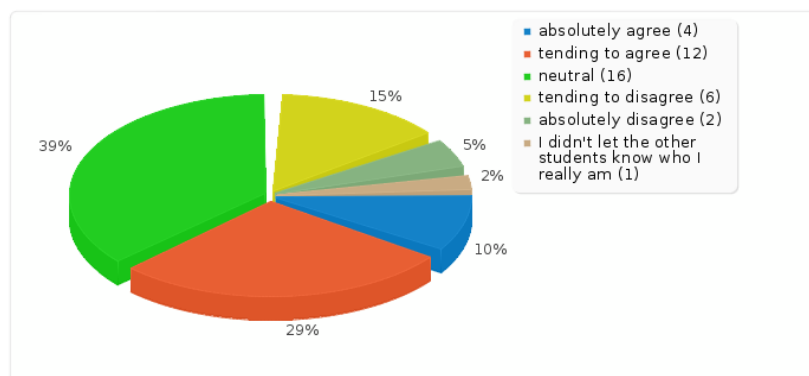
The majority of respondents felt neutral about the personal importance of letting the other students know who they are in real life. On the other hand 12 participants

tended to agree that it was important for them and even 4 participants absolutely agreed with that statement. There was also 1 person who indicated that he did not let the other students know who he is in real life. With regard to the previous question it is not the surprising that the same amount of people (32) for whom staying anonymous was not very important or irrelevant agreed with this statement respectively felt neutral about it.

Perspective and closing question

At the end the interviewees were asked what they take with them from that learning experience in Second Life. The majority shared the opinion they enjoyed trying out something new and got to know Second Life this way. They experienced Second Life as a playful way of learning and a fascinating colorful world. Because all interviewees attended a business English course they thought about certain business related things they learned and came in touch with during the course, for example knowing how to write a business plan in English now. For others it was just the general experience of getting in touch which language learning again and losing their scruple that way. After the course the majority of the interviewees never visited Second Life again – or at most for one or two times in order to show it to somebody. But apart from one person they would all visited a course like this again in Second Life.

Within the post-course-survey the participants were asked to describe how they feel about their learning experience in Second Life. The respondents had the possibility to choose between certain feelings from which they should tick all that applied:

Please try to describe how you feel about the learning experience in Second Life
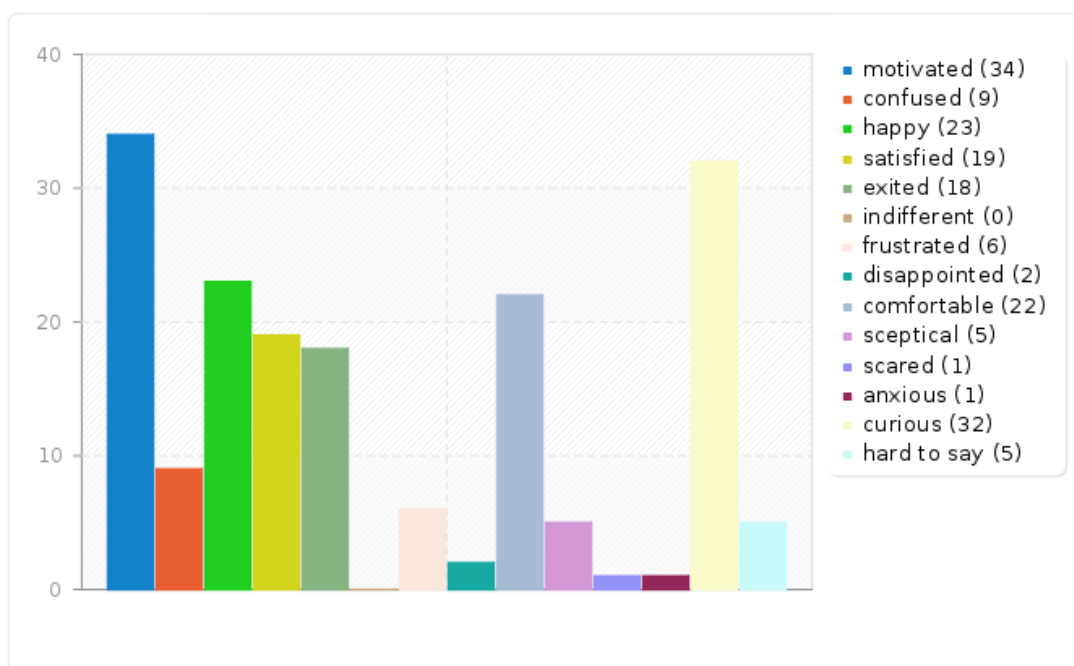
Through this question it should be evaluated how the participants felt about their

learning experience in Second Life. As in the interviews the majority of the respondents associated positive feelings with their learning experience in Second Life. Most participants felt "motivated", "happy", "comfortable" and "curious". "Satisfied" and "exited" were also named quite often.