

Simulation in Language Teaching - Its Advantages and Limitations in an ESP Context

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Simulation, role-play, drama and games play similar roles in language teaching. They are seen as ways of 'bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world' (Holden, 1983:89). These activities also introduce a variety of ways to make the whole language learning process more interesting, challenging and lively. In the first part of this article, some of the theoretical principles of simulation in the teaching of a second or foreign language will be discussed, while the second part will include a simulation activity for the classroom.

Simulation Explained

Generally, simulations have been used as a technique in education for a long time but it has only recently been applied to language teaching (Taylor & Walford, 1972; Tansey, 1969; Jones, 1982). According to Jones, simulations are gaining increasing popularity because they are 'ideally suited to language practice' (1982:2). In his book 'Simulations in Language Teaching' (1982), Jones provides a comprehensive explanation of this phenomenon and has even given an example of a simulation activity long enough to last 3 hours. For this article, his book has been used as the main literature.

First of all, Jones define simulation as a 'reality of function in a simulated and structured environment' (p.5). Essentially, a simulation has three characteristics:

1. *A reality of function* which means the participants in a simulation must step inside the role they have accepted and act accordingly.
2. *A simulated environment* where there is no contact with the real world.
3. *A structured environment* where the participants have all the facts and information provided for them.

Jones (ibid.) further declares that the language used in simulation tends to have two dominant characteristics. First, the language structure is cohesive because verbal interaction between the participants revolves around a central issue. Although there may be different views expressed, either of opposition or support, for the given topic, 'the language is held together by a mutual need arising out of the simulation, the function of the participant, and the motivation to communicate' (ibid. p 7). The second dominant characteristic is that the language is functional. Each participant plays a part in

the interaction during the simulation and the part demands appropriate language behaviour, which includes social skills and social remarks suited to that role. For example, if a participant is given the role of the Chairman of a Board of Directors, the language he/she would use is formal, authoritative, clear and diplomatic.

Another positive point about simulation is that the participant who is given the information is able to 'assimilate the information or material available to him in order that he may reach the goal set for him' (Tansey, 1969: 20). In so doing he is absorbing not only language but also knowledge of a particular subject. This serves a dual purpose: for the language class, some language skills are being put to practice; while for the subject class, information is added.

Simulations have been used in many areas of training and education, such as the army or in business studies (Megarry, 1978). But in whatever area, language is the tool used for communication. It is right, therefore, for Jones to claim that simulations and language are 'virtually inseparable' (1982:7).

Having explained the concept of simulation, it is necessary now to look at how simulations can enhance language learning and teaching.

Role of Simulation In Language Teaching

(1) It motivates learners

Simulation activities give learners a chance to be involved in language use. The learners need not feel uncomfortable as some would in the case of drama where the learners may have to act in front of a class. Some learners are shy and are not able to perform well whereas simulation only requires them to work within their teams or groups and make collective decisions (Adams, 1973). It allows everyone to participate and even when mistakes are made, the teacher does not interfere. According to Jones (1980:9)

A basic reason for simulation is that mistakes are both inevitable and desirable. It is experiential language, not programmed language, or a rehearsed event...

Moreover, simulation takes place in a stress-free situation and once in control of the task, learners are motivated to complete the simulation. The more challenging the simulation, the more motivated learners become (see Tansey, 1969; Jones, 1982).

(2) It gives opportunity for meaningful practice of language learnt

Simulation and language are interrelated because most simulations involve interaction, either verbal or non-verbal, in spoken or written form. However, simulations are especially useful for oral courses, where learners learn to voice their opinions and listen to one another. Taylor and Walford (1972:35) assert that:

The interconnection and interdependence of ideas help to generate a richer group dialogue.

In holding dialogues among themselves, learners inevitably learn to use language communicatively. It has been noted that simulations can be a popular tool for language teaching activities (see Jones, 1980). And Kerr (1977), as cited in Jones (1980:60) reiterates that simulations:

...ensure that communication is purposeful (in contrast to the inescapable artificiality of so many traditional exercises and drills); and secondly, they require an integrative use of language in which communicating one's meaning takes proper precedence over the mere elements of language learning (grammar and pronunciation).

(3) It injects a feeling of realism and relevance into the classroom

This makes the language learning process more exciting as teachers move away from just using textbooks or written materials for language practice. Well-planned simulations that are relevant to the learners will certainly encourage learners to want to complete the tasks and as Jones (1982:14) points out, learners may even 'become oblivious to anything that is not directly relevant to the simulation experience' once they get 'into' the task.

(4) It can be used as an assessment technique

Oral examinations can make use of simulations where students are given different roles to play in groups of fours or fives and left to interact on their own. The assessor observes and scores the students based on a marking scheme. (Gibbs, 1974; Jones, 1982).

(5) It encourages creativity

Although simulation tasks begin with information given to learners, it also takes a certain amount of the learners' ingenuity to generate their ideas to complete the simulation. The better the learners are, the faster they may arrive at a solution to the problem presented. This provides ample opportunities for creativity on the learners' part. (Jones, 1980).

There are many advantages in using simulations in the language classroom but there are also some limitations which will be discussed in the following section.

Some Limitations of Simulation

(1) Time constraints

To carry out a simulation in class requires time and in most language syllabuses, time is a constraining factor. If teachers plan ahead they may be able to 'squeeze in' one or two simulations in a month or a term, depending on the intensity of the language course. Simulations can be as short as 30 minutes or last a few weeks. Again, the nature of the course should be taken into account.

(2) Selection of suitable simulations

Some criteria will have to be set before selecting the appropriate simulation. Factors to be considered include the language level of the learners, the costs of purchasing or making simulation sets, its relevance to the students and so on.

(3) Operational problems A number of things have to be done before a simulation is used in the lesson. The learners have to be clearly instructed and suitable roles have to be designated to individual learners. The teacher has to act as the Controller and once the simulation begins, the controller should not interfere. Therefore, it is important that the instructions are understood or the simulation may fail. There is also a need to 'de-brief' the learners after the simulation is completed. This stage is similar to that of an evaluation where the teacher has to comment on the learners' performance in the simulation. This may be a difficult task if there are more than two groups in a class.

Having outlined above some of the theoretical issues underlying the use of simulations in language teaching, I would like relate these to a English for Specific Purpose (ESP context).

Simulations for an Oral Component in ESP

Most Malaysian undergraduates are required to take English courses to help them in their academic studies. The courses are designed as ESP to cater to the various disciplines of the study in local universities. One such course is Oral Skills for Management Studies aimed at Management students in the Economics Faculty at the University of Malaya. The emphasis here is on the learners' listening and speaking skills in English.

In fact, it is interesting to note that simulation tasks in the form of problem-solving activities originated from management training courses (see Holden, 1981). In the Oral Skills course, the undergraduates use a basic text which takes them through several units of language structures such as language of explanation, enquiry, clarification, requests, negotiation, opposition and so on. It is within this context that simulation activities can help the language learning process to be more effective and challenging. The teacher who acts as the controller oversees the task.

Conclusion

Language teaching can be an interesting process when teachers make the effort to explore a variety of approaches. Simulation is just one of the many methods available for exploitation. Jones (1982:3) sums up the simulation technique as 'one expression of the philosophy that students should be active participants in the learning process'. With both the teacher and learner playing active roles in the classroom, language classes can become more lively, more challenging and much more rewarding.

PART II

SIMULATION

TITLE TO MAKE A BID

PARTICIPANTS 5:

1. Finance Manager
2. Factory Manager
3. Sales Manager
4. Office Manager
5. Director

SITUATION

The company is making available RM10, 000 for upgrading only one of the departments. There are 4 departments, each under the leadership of a manager (as in the above). At the next Board of Directors meeting, each department is allowed to make a bid for the sum of money stating the reason the money is needed. The Director will then decide the successful bidder.

ROLE CARDS

FINANCE MANAGER

You need a part-time accountant to help clear up work before the next financial year. There has been a back log because two of your accountants have gone on long medical leave. Convince the Board that the RM10,000 be used to employ a part-time accountant.

FACTORY MANAGER

The factory staff is complaining about the appalling condition of the factory canteen. You would like the RM10, 000 to renovate the canteen as soon as possible.

SALES MANAGER

Your sales department has been receiving many orders and some are coming in from overseas. You need a new fax machine to cope with the increase in the sale orders.

OFFICE MANAGER

You need a new photocopier as the old one, which has served the company for more than 6 years is always breaking down.

DIRECTOR

After listening to the views given by each manager, you have to decide who to give the bid to and state your reasons. Be open for discussion with the managers before you make a decision.

LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Explaining & Justifying
Defending & Opposing

TIME

1 hour lesson

CLASS

20 students, 5 in each group: 4 groups. At the end of 45 minutes, the 'Director' reports on the decision for each group.

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