

MEETINGS: SIMULATION AS A MEANS OF PRE-TEACHING EVALUATION IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Simulation has been defined in many different ways. Cohen and Manion (1985) identify role-playing, gaming and machine or computer simulation as three strands of studies currently popular in simulation studies. The distinction between these three types of simulation is by no means clear-cut; simulation games often contain role-playing activities and may be designed with computer back-up services. Stephen M. Smith (1984) defines a simulation as "... a means of activating the knowledge and language associated with topics you and your students are studying.

Maley and Duff (1978) call simulation "an attempt to place learners in circumstances resembling as closely as possible, those they will actually meet with in daily life". They, too, recognise simulations as involving overt role-playing.

The function of a simulation is to give participants the opportunity to practice taking on specific roles and improvising within specific situations on the assumption that, with practice, the participants will play their roles more effectively when situations involving similar skills occur in real life. Using given details of the relevant aspects of a situation, participants have to make decisions or come to an agreement or resolve a problem, thus meeting a challenge posed by the simulated situation. Some people see gaming as a simulation designed to bring about learning as a natural by-product of the problem-solving actions of a game.

In simulations involving role-playing, the following uses may be identified:

1. Developing sensitivity and awareness
2. Experiencing the pressures which create roles
3. Testing out for oneself possible modes of behaviour, and
4. Simulating a situation for others to learn from.

Besides these learning objectives, the simulation fulfills certain functions for the teacher. It may be fitted into a schedule

- i. as an introduction to the subject
- ii. as a means of supplementing or following on from a point that is being explored
- iii. as a focal point of a course or unit of work
- iv. as a break from the routine of the classroom or the workshop
- v. as a way of summarising or integrating diverse subject matter
- vi. as a way of reviewing or revising a topic
- vii. as a means of assessing work (Cohen & Manion, 1985)

The simulation presented in this paper serves both as a situation for others to learn from and as an introduction to a subject.

Simulation in the Language Classroom

While role-play and simulations have long been used as a form of training in the professional field, it was only in the 60s that they made their way into classrooms. It was even later that their value as effective devices for facilitating communication practice in the foreign language classroom was formally recognised. Wilkins' notional-functional syllabus and Curan's innovative classroom technique based on group dynamics, failed to take into account the fact that language learning takes place in the context of a culture and specific real-life situations in which learners play many roles. A simulation activity provides a specific situation within which students can practice various communication skills like asserting oneself, expressing opinions, convincing others, arguing, eliciting opinions, group-problem solving, analysing situations and so on. (Stephen Smith, 1984).

In the ESP Classroom, a marriage of the original role of simulation as a training device in the professional arena and of its new-found role as a language and communication generator, can take place.

In this type of classroom, the use of case studies in open-ended situations is particularly useful in practising and evaluating the use of procedures and language (vocabulary and structures) specific to particular skills.

As Gill Sturtridge (1981) aptly points out, "they provide a test and feedback on communicative competence, help develop empathy between barriers and provide a rehearsal for life."

Before we go on to the present study, a look at some viewpoints regarding the advantages and disadvantages of practising simulation activities in the classroom will allow us some measure of comparison with the case at hand. J. Neelands (1984) lists among the pros of a simulation situation, its very controlled nature and its limited and well-defined focus which makes it useful with difficult groups and inexperienced teachers since the teacher can control the situation and set its limits. A simulation itself makes vocal demands without the need to act out situations and is good for establishing different viewpoints, looking at registers and roles and (as this study will show) is a good starting point for discussion. The disadvantages according to Neelands is that the closed nature of a simulation offers little chance for inventiveness and its outcome tends to be predictable. Reflection is unlikely to occur within the activity, and understanding of the role is limited to the particular situation. Cohen and Manion (1985) quote Taylor and Walford (1972) as identifying the advantages and disadvantages of simulation exercises under two themes which cover a wider scope than Neeland's arguments.

First is the claimed enhancement of pupil motivation which is said to include a heightened interest and excitement in learning, a sustained level of freshness and novelty due to the dynamic nature of simulation tasks, a change in the traditional pupil-teacher subordinate-superordinate relationship and the fact that simulation is a universal behavioural mode. Second is the role of simulation in the provision of relevant learning materials; learning is afforded at the cognitive, social and emotional levels. Participants acquire decision-making experiences and increased role awareness. Contrary to Neeland's viewpoint that inventiveness and role-understanding is crippled by the closed nature of the simulation, Taylor and Walford see it as a vehicle for free interdisciplinary communication. By its very nature and approach, simulation bridges the gap between 'schoolwork' and 'the real world'. The reservations that Taylor and Watford express over the use of simulation are questionable - that they are time consuming and that commercially available simulation games are expensive and possibly unsuited not only as legitimate educational techniques but also to student needs. Considering the fact that most simulation activities are written for specific needs, it would be better or even expected that the language teacher produces his/her own simulation in order to ensure that the background is familiar to the intended participants and they can see its relevance to the specific problem that concerns them.

Very little research has been done in relation to the use of simulation in the language classroom, Of those existing, Shamon Kelly Butler (1977) in *Language as Play: Teaching Composition through Gaming* (dissertation for Ph.D.) incorporated simulation exercises to explore attitudes and promote language awareness as part of her evaluation. She then attempted to test various hunches, that simulation actually teaches and increases student awareness about processes and relationships. This was done using the BAFA-BAFA evaluation form. Results indicated that students participating were involved and interested, gained awareness, were required to be highly observant and able to communicate and were indeed motivated to express themselves. They also acknowledged developing more realistic views. These results match the inventory of 8 hunches drawn up by Butler (1977) that simulations

1. may be motivators,
2. may encourage sophisticated and relevant inquiry,
3. may encourage the development of a more integrated view of life,
4. may encourage skills, of decision-making and problem-solving and generally of how to deal with people,
5. may encourage development of empathy for real life decision-makers,
6. may provide the opportunity for a realistic conception of human behaviour,
7. may allow for better student-teacher relationships, the importance of the simulation being its effect on the social setting in which learning occurs,
8. may encourage personal growth.

Unfortunately all the other authors cited, besides defining and describing modes of simulation as a dramatic technique beneficial, to learning, and giving original and commercial examples of this, do not present evidence of any research to back their claims.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study uses a teacher-created simulation - a meeting as a preteaching activity with the objective of

1. assessing the students ability to think logically and speak up in such a situation
2. assessing the students' knowledge of the processes and procedures of meetings
3. having the role-playing group and the observing students evaluate the performance
4. using the evaluation to enable the students to establish their own needs and the teacher to establish student needs
5. using the observations and evaluations made from feedback as a starting block for the teaching of the processes and procedures of meetings.

The simulation had been piloted with a group of TESL teachers during a Master's course and had been reported as lending itself to classroom use.

Subjects

The subjects were 23 young adult Malay students of the School of Business at the Mara Institute of Technology (ITM) Shah Alam. They were 20 years old and had all been through a Malay-medium primary and secondary education where English was taught as a subject. All had obtained fairly good grades in English in the secondary final examination. At ITM they had gone through two semesters of Foundation courses in English, one semester of Intermediate English and one of ESP, doing Report Writing. Now they were in their fifth semester doing a final ESP paper called Functional English of which the pra'ctices and procedures of meetings is a component. All of them were specialising in business courses, namely Banking, Administration, Marketing and Investment Analysis. They had all participated in simple role-play and simulation as part of the listening and speaking component in the second semester of the Foundation English course but had never been exposed to simulation as a teaching/learning toot in their core-paper classes.

The researcher had been teaching them the Functional English paper over a period of 10 weeks before this simulation exercise was carried out. During these weeks the students had been taught the relevant functional skills necessary to prepare for and attend interviews. They were then assessed through a formal job interview. The assessment revealed that though the students could conceptualise and think maturely as befitting their age, they had difficulty in expressing these ideas in English. This may seem strange considering the number of English courses they had gone through, but a plausible explanation is that the ITM campus where most of the students live does not provide an environment for the development of spoken English. All but a handful of the students are Malay and so the language of interaction is Bahasa Malaysia; hence their difficulty in expressing themselves in English.

Procedure

The students had been briefed at the close of the previous lesson, that the class would be moving on to the study of the functional skills necessary to conduct and attend meetings. The class had also discussed the role and relevance of meetings in their choice of careers. In this lesson the students were provided with copies of the teacher-made simulation exercise given below.

SIMULATION-A meeting of the Committee of Jungle vs Man.

Members in attendance.

Group A

Tiger - representing all Carniverous Cats
 Elephant - representing all Big Ones
 Snake - representing all Creepy Crawlies
 Monkey - representing all Small Animals and Tree Dwellers (birds).

Group B

Timber magnate (representing loggers)
 Director of the National Zoo (representing the Tourist Board)
 Town Developer (representing private developers)
 Finance Ministry Official (representing the Government)
 Chairman - Minister of Education (neutral party)

The situation

Group B wants to deforest a jungle area with the aim of developing a new township.

Group A naturally defends its rights to the jungle.

The above committee was formed for the purpose of resolving such problems that arise from time to time.

Care had been taken to use elements that were within the students' experience. Though a meeting between animals and humans is not a possibly realistic situation, the issue of deforestation and development vs conservation and animal protectionism has been the focus of public debate in the recent past. A few minutes were spent orienting the students to the simulation and explaining the student performance objectives to be achieved through the simulation experience, namely, to provide the means

1. to assess their ability to think clearly and speak up in a problem-solving situation.
2. to assess their knowledge of the processes and procedures of meetings.
3. to have them assess their own performance, and
4. to use this evaluation to assess their needs.

Volunteers were called for to participate in the role-play and were assigned roles while the other students were instructed to watch and note down observations. The nine role players were not given any instructions on how a meeting should be conducted or what stand to take. They were, however, briefly told how their roles were related to the situation. They sat around tables in the centre of the classroom while the observers sat in an outer circle.

Once the meeting began (albeit hesitantly), the lecturer fell into the role of observer. Whenever a particularly hesitant student looked at the lecturer for approval after making a contribution to the meeting, the lecturer responded with a nod, smile or the word 'good', to encourage further effort.

The meeting was allowed to progress for about fifteen minutes (by which time there was a stalemate in the discussions) before a piece of new information was introduced to force a decision - "There was a forest fire in the jungle under dispute".

The activity was stopped after twenty minutes and was followed with a post-simulation discussion.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the simulation in meeting the stated objectives was obtained through

1. observation of behaviour during the simulation
2. the post-simulation discussion
3. an interview with the role-players to obtain their responses to participating in the simulation (see Feedback B)
4. a feed-back questionnaire filled by members of the class (see appendix C) on the suitability and motivational effect of the simulation (adapted from the BAFA-BAFA simulation by Butler Shanon Kelly, 1977).

It is worthwhile to note here that the ideal would have been to compare the above feedback with videotaped evidence of the simulation. Unfortunately, time constraints did not permit this. It is likely though, that the presence of the video camera might have prompted the students into unnatural behaviour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained using the four modes of evaluation were first examined separately and then compared to each other to look for supporting or contradictory evidence and finally matched with the objectives of the simulation exercise to assess to what extent these objectives were met.

It was noted that the meeting began with great hesitation; first the chairperson, in a fit of panic, opted out of that position and became a committee member. Another member who had more confidence, took her place. He obviously had a better idea of what to do. He managed an opening address of sorts and introduced the members to each other. From then on discussion began slowly but surely. The animal representatives fell into their roles quite well and their arguments showed that they were intelligently drawing from their own knowledge of current affairs as their arguments for saving the forest moved from personal to environmental concerns and into current affairs, citing recent city flash-floods as being caused by deforestation. The group representing the humans had more difficulty in finding arguments initially but after some hesitation managed to produce some plausible ones. Observations of particular interest were that:

1. in the early stages of role-playing students became uncomfortable with the lapses of silence between speakers and began helping one another to decide who should speak. Towards the end, their shyness left them and they began prompting each other with ideas.
2. They spoke more and more unselfconsciously as the meeting progressed, disregarding their own bad grammar. This was evidenced through their progressive lack of hesitation in their utterances.

3. the students had no idea of the procedure of meetings. They spoke across the table, ignoring the Chairman and spoke out of turn. There were no attempts at negotiation or decision-making. Finally the Chairman took control of the meeting to quieten the more vocal members and invited the quieter ones to express their views in turn.
4. The students were often repetitive in their arguments and the discussion was non-progressive.
5. The introduction of a new piece of information regarding a forest fire caused some confusion in their trend of thinking. Some carried on with the same line of argument and had to be reminded of the forest fire.

The animal representatives stubbornly insisted that the animals would hang around a nearby forest until their own forest regrew!

When the activity was stopped after 20 minutes, no solution had been suggested.

Comments from the observing students during the post-simulation discussion matched the observations made by this lecturer. The first comment was the most pertinent.

"That was not a meeting. It was a debate".

Another comment was

"The meeting had no end. They did not make a decision".

They reasoned that this was because the committee members were not pushed into making a decision and laid the blame for this on the Chairman. When questioned further about how the Chairman could have pushed the Committee into making a decision, they said the Chairman should have made the members vote. They did not mention the need for proposals of motions before voting. The observers agreed that participation at the meeting was generally good.

This evidence of ignorance regarding the procedure of meetings was further supported by the interview-responses of the role-playing students. While all nine of them had participated in meetings before, they all acknowledged having been passive participants at poorly organised meetings. They reported that their initial feelings were reluctance, and nervousness mainly because they were unprepared. Once into the discussion, three of them said they had felt lost, two had been nervous while the other four had been confident, interested and involved. Being confident they were also more relaxed. They were also the more vocal students. Among the main problems the role-playing students said they faced were

1. inability to express ideas because of the lack of language - 4 students
2. lack of ideas even though they had the language command 3 students.
3. One student reported no problems". Observations had indicated that he was the most fluent speaker. On the other hand, another who had hardly spoken reported being short of ideas and language.

These reasons explain why their arguments were repetitive.

While all of them felt they might have been more comfortable with prior notice and more preparation time, one student noted that the element of spontaneity in the simulation was good because they had been forced into speech that they otherwise would never have attempted. He confessed that prior notice would have tempted him to come with prepared texts of stereotyped answers!

An analysis of the feedback questionnaire on the suitability and motivational effect of the simulation showed that, based on a rating of high, medium and low, the students reacted positively to the stimulus. The questionnaire was distributed after the post-simulation discussion and the students responses are inclusive of what they learned through this discussion. Almost all of them found the simulation interesting and instrumental in involving them in discussion or in the process of the simulation. They were made very aware of what could happen at meetings and rated as high the role of the simulation in improving their understanding of meetings. They were able to some extent to draw upon past knowledge and said that the simulation

1. helped them to increase observational and communication skills,
2. influenced for the better, their attitudes towards participation in meetings,
3. provided them with relevant experience and a realistic opportunity in the classroom
4. greatly motivated them to share impressions and observations.

Most of the ratings were between high and medium. A comparison of responses of the role-playing students with those of the observers showed that the role-players found the simulation much more interesting than the observers did and felt more involved in the discussion and process. However contrary to expectations, it was the observers who reported gaining a better insight into the possibilities of what meetings can deteriorate into and gained a better understanding of procedures. It would seem that in having to cope with the trauma of speaking in English within the domain of meetings, the role-playing students concentrated on organising the content and language for their utterances at the expense of being alert to the procedure and the 'sense' of the meetings. This is in line with Neeland's claim that "reflection is unlikely to occur within the activity". Although 77.8% of the role-playing students rated as 'average', their ability to draw on past knowledge, it was obvious from the shortcomings of their performance that their past knowledge was very limited and probably intuitive. It was further supported by the other 22.2% who rated this ability as low. Both groups did not vary much in positively rating the simulation as aiding their skills in observation and communication, affecting their attitudes towards participation and motivating them to share their views with others. They also concurred closely in their ratings that the experience was relevant and that they now had a more realistic idea of meetings.

CONCLUSION

In relation to the objectives set out earlier we can draw the following conclusions from the responses and observations.

1. Though some of the role players had difficulty in expressing themselves in English initially, this handicap was soon subordinated to the need to communicate. Lack of practice in using the language slowed down their ability to express their ideas but in focusing their attention on the content of the communication rather than on language itself, they had themselves created out of the simulation, a natural language environment. However the fact that some other students had a good command of the language but reported being short of ideas indicates that perhaps such spontaneous simulations may be too demanding for ESL students. Prior notice may permit both proficient and not so proficient students time to organise their thoughts, recall the kind of language needed and stem nervousness and self-consciousness.

2. The students needed to be taught the language functions relevant to meetings and processes and procedures of meetings in theory and through practice.
3. The simulation was beneficial both to the role-players and to observers. Their responses in the feedback sheets indicate that gains in terms of learning were almost equal for both groups, in fact even better for the observing group. Some of the gains by the role players might possibly be less obviously cognitive, social or emotional and might be cumulative in nature so that they emerge with repeated participation. The students were astute in their observations of their own shortcomings and of what benefits were gained through the simulation.
4. The post simulation discussion served as a forum for the students, to acknowledge that though they understood that the purpose of a meeting was to solve problems and make decisions, they did not know what processes and procedures led to decision-making and the kind of language to employ.

In the lessons that followed, this simulated meeting became an excellent reference point for, teaching. Theories and rules governing meeting procedures became more meaningful to the students. An interesting example was the students' claim that prior notice of the simulation would have been helpful. Never was the importance of and the need for the "notice" of a meeting more aptly explained than through their own admission.

As a teaching and learning device then, this simulation was found to be particularly effective. Although the results do not exhibit all the advantages claimed for simulations as post-teaching and practice activities, the objectives set forth in this study were fulfilled. An added advantage was that with the subordination of the teacher's role there was maximum learning with minimum 'teaching', thus learning through experience and self-discovery. Peer teaching also contributed to learning.

Neeland's (1984) claim that meetings as a simulation mode can become dominated by the most vocal members, is invalidated by the role of the Chairman in eliciting viewpoints from all members. What seems like inhibition on the part of the quiet members is often an inability to express themselves for lack of language and practice.

One disadvantage of this particular simulation was that it was, because of its defined objectives, not an ideal practice activity. Though it was used successfully with this ESP group, it was only a starting point for teaching'.

The process would not be complete if no post-teaching practice and evaluation activities were carried out. For these purposes, similarly constructed simulations with appropriate objectives would serve well.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

An approach such as this in the use of simulation allows not only the teacher to evaluate the students and assess their needs but also allows the students to evaluate themselves and assess and formulate their own needs. While Sturtridge (1986) argues that in language learning, the end product (decision) is of less importance than the language used to achieve it, we might add that in the ESP classroom it is important to specify the language according to functional objectives which in turn are inseparable from formal procedures. A longitudinal research beginning with a pie-teaching evaluative simulation and other activities and then followed by post-teaching, practice, and evaluation simulations would allow for measurement of progress and a comparison of effectiveness at each stage.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This study focuses on behavioural changes and attitudes of the students with regard to the simulation. However, since there was no video or audio-taped evidence, no analysis was made of the language generated by the simulation. Such an analysis would have enabled the lecturer to establish the students' linguistic needs, an aspect not dealt with here. Video evidence would have been useful in validating both the observations made and the feedback responses.

USING THE SIMULATION WITH OTHER GROUPS

With a little adaptation the simulation could be used in the EFL/ESL classroom to teach and practice particular functions. With a change of roles and situations this simulation lends itself to use with many other ESP groups from different fields like Law and Medicine.

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