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THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SIMULATION AS AN EXPERIENTIAL TECHNIQUE IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

Abstract

This paper describes the design and implementation of the Company Simulation, offered as an experiential, communicative, student-centered and task-based project in the English language course for students of business informatics and e-business at the Belgrade Business School.

In Languages for Specific Purposes, simulations are seen as a viable action-based solution to the challenging requirements of new globalized contexts of learning and working. The integrated acquisition of linguistic and subject matter competences and skills via purposeful and meaningful interactions in activities designed to replicate real-world professional tasks has shown to raise students' interest, engagement and investment in their work.

Key words: simulation, communicative approach, experiential learning, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), task-based approach

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1. Introduction and background to the study

One learns by doing a thing; for though you think you know it,
you have no certainty until you try.
Sophocles

Teaching in the 21st century and preparing students for the workplace of the contemporary Conceptual Age, a new era where the analytical and logical abilities valued in the Information Age will have to be accompanied by inventive and empathic abilities (Pink 2005), confronts educators with many challenges. New generations of learners, the so-called digital natives of the "game generation" (Prensky 2001: 65), the millennial generation, "google" or "youtube" generation, as they have been identified in various contexts and media, and the complex requirements of the new globalized educational and workplace arena set many expectations before educational approaches and classroom practices, demanding critical analysis and a quest for imaginative and creative solutions aimed at whole person development.

The first part of this paper will describe the rationale for the chosen approach, its theoretical and methodological foundations, and the definition, role and place of simulation as a pedagogical technique in the field of language education, while the second part will be devoted to the design and implementation of a task-based experiential project using simulation as an alternative/complementary approach to teaching English for Specific Purposes to the students of business informatics and e-business at the Belgrade Business School. This project resulted from our search for a viable, holistic, learner-centered and meaningful instruction format in compliance with the tenets of the communicative approach to language learning and teaching, adapted to the needs of language and professional communication in the future workplace (Huhta *et al* 2013). The project objectives were to prepare students for operating effectively in a professional environment, by acquiring the pertinent jargon, a set of academic, i.e. professional skills in our case, and a repertoire of language skills used in everyday informal chat and interactions with colleagues (Gatehouse, 2001).

The aims and motivation for this project were to try out the pedagogical and linguistic effectiveness of experiential, deep-end strategies in:

a) creating a learning experience that would be closer to the world and the way digital natives think and act, including a strong fun and game element, offering excitement, challenges and cooperation;
b) bringing teaching and learning closer to real-world professional experiences, by integrating language, content and skills development into meaningful and purposeful tasks that replicate target tasks.

In this way we tried to accommodate to the ever-increasing demands of 21st century language education in the field of English for Specific Purposes, in the hope of increasing motivation and achieving deeper and more comprehensive learning results.

2. The context of the study

The introduction of new innovative techniques was preceded by a comprehensive needs analysis conducted on a wide range of stakeholders, students, teachers and IT professionals, revealing valuable and reliable data on the actual needs of our students in their future multidimensional workplace of IT engineering and business informatics, where there are no strict boundaries between different fields, and domains are often fuzzy and blurred.

The survey has shown both the need and desire for a combination and integration of general, business and IT English, thus necessitating a wide-angle approach with a specific emphasis on various communicative aspects, particularly the business and social aspects of communication. Our findings concur with the conclusions of seminal research that has shown that integration in the workplace relies not only on skilled formal communication, but on competent informal interactions as well, such as chat on professional and everyday topics, building rapport, humour, etc. (Holmes 2005: 345).

This is consistent with a highly pronounced contemporary tendency to emphasise the role of soft skills as an important prerequisite for success and advancement in the professional world of engineers (Gilleard and Gilleard 2002; ABET 2014: 3). Although language teaching in this particular field has in the past predominantly put emphasis on written texts and reading skills with a primary orientation on preparing students for studying their

specialist subjects and following developments in their field, a careful study of the workplace needs has shown that professionals in the engineering field should acquire skills enabling them to communicate effectively in a number of situations, including social communication on both technical and nontechnical matters (Hutchinson and Sawyer-Laucanno 1990: 136).

This has inspired us to explore simulation as a technique that will enable both combination and integration in developing communicative, interpersonal, social and cognitive competences and skills, along with professional and content knowledge and skills, thus promoting creativity, cooperation and teamwork as the key elements in professional success and performance (Knutson 2003; Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 2006). Simulation as a technique is both communicative and interactional and has a strong game element in it, making it a highly inspiring and engaging instruction format and therefore conducive to effective learning (Hutchinson and Sawyer-Laucanno 1990: 135-141; Basturkmen 2006: 22-23)

3. Simulations – an overview

Although games and simulations have been present in the field of amusement and entertainment for thousands of years, their use in education and training started much later at the end of the 18th century. The first applications of games and simulations were recorded in the field of military training, followed later by management and business education and training and soon games and simulations started gaining ground in a range of other disciplines (Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 2006: ix-x). Over time, we have witnessed an impressive development in the field of gaming and simulation, and a growth in the variety of types and range of applications (Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 2006; Crookall 2010). Today, "it is a promising, and rapidly expanding field of study", changing and developing, and constantly improving and evolving, "with new trends emerging, and new avenues of thought being explored" (USA Information Resources Management Association 2011: xxiv-xxv).

Simulations are growing in popularity in both schools and institutions of higher education, and a renewed interest in simulations has also been witnessed in the field of foreign language teaching (Levine 2004: 26; Dupuy 2006: 3). One of the many reasons for their rising pervasiveness stems from the fact that teaching practice has not fully followed in the footsteps

of the insights gained in SLA and the proclaimed changes in the direction of the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm (Levine 2004: 26). Simulations may offer an answer to this problem as they reflect both the communicative and the interactional view of language seen "as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals" (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 21).

3.1. Simulations - the theoretical and methodological background

Simulations belong to the field of experiential learning, "learning by doing", which highlights the central role of experience in learning (Kolb 1984: 20-1). It views learning as a dialectic process, involving a transaction between the person and the environment, "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (*Ibid*: 38).

Experiential learning requires active participation, doing something meaningful, being in touch with the phenomenon being studied, and not just observing it (Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001; Knutson 2003). "In the field of second-language acquisition (SLA), the experiential approach encourages learners to develop the target language skills through the experience of working together on a specific task, rather than only examining the discrete elements of the target language" (Knutson 2003: 53). It promotes learning by means of self-discovery and experimentation, and it helps build a stimulating atmosphere full of excitement and enthusiasm, encouraging effort and motivation in both students and teachers.

In its various forms, experiential learning is conducive to the integration of communication, content and skills acquisition. It mirrors real life communication, encourages collaborative learning and teamwork, and fully complies with the priority goals and recommendations proposed in many official standards and documents for the 21st century educational context (EU Commission 1995: 49; 62; Council of Europe 2001; Framework for 21st century learning). It fosters the development of interpersonal skills and enhances the four C's – critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity/ innovation, preparing students to apply their knowledge and skills and develop a "global competence for their future careers and experiences" (World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. 21st century skills map).

Experiential learning is highly compatible with the requirements of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in general, and easily lends itself to ESP settings and requirements for authentic language use and authentic tasks, with a focus on the language of discourse and learner-centeredness (Oxford and Crookall 1990; Stoller 2006). In ESP, simulations of workplace situations can easily be adapted to suit the target needs of students in professional fields with the effect of promoting enhanced learning.

In language learning pedagogy, simulations are often identified as deep-end strategies, teaching and learning strategies where performance is the starting-departure point (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998: 4-5; 187-195). Students are thrown in at the deep end; they are placed in a communicative situation where they are expected to perform, to execute a task resembling a target real-world professional activity using whatever existing language and specialist knowledge/ competence or skill available with minimum teacher input (Bloor and Bloor 1986: 12-13; Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998: 190). Linguistic forms are not determined in advance, yet the drive to communicate and reach the required outcome in a meaningful and purposeful interaction necessitates the activation of all old and new forms and strategies (Willis and Willis 2001: 173-4).

As a highly versatile and flexible technique, simulation is believed to be particularly suitable for intermediate and advanced level students in activating, consolidating and reinforcing existing competences and skills thus enhancing the learning experience, "powers of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation" (Ellington, Gordon and Fowlie 2006: 6). Furthermore, it creates an extremely powerful environment for promoting the development of the verbal repertoire and revealing holes in the existing knowledge system, creating a metacognitive state where there is a readiness and susceptibility to receive instruction (Basturkmen 2006: 4).

Although the focus in deep-end strategies is assumed to be primarily on the output, in simulations we generally encounter a richly intertwined texture of output, input and interaction, thus incorporating the key factors to second language acquisition. For this reason, simulations can be expected to meet the terms of all the three most relevant SLA hypotheses: input (Krashen 1982), output (Swain 1985) and interaction (Long 1981) hypotheses. The richness and variety of output, modified interactions and negotiation of meaning in the direction of creating comprehensible input, are the core of communication and building social relations and the key

and indispensible ingredients of successful language learning (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 228).

4. The Company Simulation – design, structure and implementation

Following Jones' (1982: 5) definition of simulation as "a reality of function in a simulated and structured environment", with the Company Simulation we have made an attempt to create a representation resembling the settings of the corporate world reality with the students acting out their chosen business roles. The Company Simulation was deemed a relevant framework for the English I course as it encompasses all the business elements and tasks relevant to both business and IT students who are being increasingly encouraged to enter the entrepreneurial world of IT startups believed to have great future potential. It offers just the kind of context and experiences that may arise in the future workplace and working life of our students, either in setting up their own companies, or being involved in the process of looking for a job, performing different functions in an enterprise, exchanging telephone calls and e-mails, requesting information, making quotations, placing orders and socializing with foreign guests and associates.

As presented in Table 1 below, we have built the Company Simulation around the tasks and subtasks involving some of the typical situations in the target culture: establishing companies, dividing company roles and recruiting personnel, attending a trade fair, and different business interactions and transactions.

Table 1: The Structure of the Company Simulation

Stage I	Company establishment	A Briefing – Framework
		B Setting up a company
		C Deciding on a business idea
		D Delegating roles and responsibilities
		E Presentation

Stage II	Recruitment and job applications	A Briefing – Framework
		B Job applications – CVs & cover letters
		C Review and reflection
Stage III	Attending a business fair	A Opening activity – Framework
		B Booking flights & accommodation
		C Making contacts at the trade fair
		D Wining and Dining
		E Review and reflection
Stage IV	Conducting business transactions	A Opening activity – Framework
		B E-mailing – enquiries, offers, placing an order, complaints
		C Review and reflection
Stage V	Final Presentation	
Stage VI	Debriefing and Evaluation	A Feedback and Comments Evaluation & Discussion

The Company Simulation has six stages, with the briefing and debriefing phase/ session accompanying most phases of the project. The briefing session, the exposure phase, is the opportunity to introduce students to the simulation in general and the subsequent tasks, to introduce some specialist vocabulary and useful expressions (Bullard 1990: 59-60), to give students a relevant framework and to activate the content and linguistic and socio-cultural background knowledge (Knutson 2003: 56-57).

On the other hand, the reflection/debriefing session serves as "a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualisation" (Kohonen 2007: 1-2), a pre-requisite for successful experiential learning to take place. It requires learners to actively engage with their own past acquisition experiences and focuses them on the future. It involves a joint reconstruction of the learning experience, analysis and evaluation of its success, and reflection on the emotions and challenges faced (Jones 1982; Bullard 1990; Knutson 2003). It opens the door for corrective work, and is the key to the transformation of experience into knowledge (Kolb 1984: 38).

The simulation method is essentially task-based. It revolves around the completion of tasks and meets the four criteria for task-based instruction, where meaning is primary, there is a goal which needs to be worked towards, the activity is outcome-evaluated and there is a relationship to the real world (Skehan 1996: 38).

The tasks in the Company Simulation were built around different appropriate communicative situations, and structured to trigger the simulation, stimulate information exchange and provide an incentive to communication (Horner and McGinley 1990: 37-39). The tasks were structured in such a way as to have tangible outcomes and clear and meaningful purposes. They involved information gathering and decision-making activities, cooperation, knowledge sharing and negotiating of meaning in bridging information gaps and other problem-solving situations.

In the first stage, following a short brainstorming session aimed at building the conceptual framework of company set-ups, organizational charts and the roles of different departments, the students in mixed-ability teams composed of 4 to 8 members set about the task of establishing their own companies, defining the company ownership and organizational type, name and headquarters, defining their business operations and main business ideas, along with the selection of roles appropriate for the chosen type of practice and business plan (general manager, executive secretary, financial manager, etc.). This stage ended in short company presentations intended to serve both as a "hook", an exciting activity aimed at engaging and sustaining student motivation in further work, as well as a necessary step for the further development of the simulation.

Stage two revolved around designing and preparing CVs and cover letters for the appropriate company positions. The students were given the freedom to keep their own identity or build a new one for the purpose of the simulation, depending on their personal choice and creativity. This was part of our effort to create a learning experience which would lower the anxiety level and students' self-consciousness so that they would feel free and unconstrained.

Phase three, one of the most exciting stages in the project, was designed around preparations for attending a business fair, and was aimed at practicing different interactions common in the professional world, such as booking flights and accommodation, making contacts with prospective business associates, and conducting both formal and informal social

interactions important in establishing, building and maintaining rapport in business relations. The goal of this phase was for each company to make at least one business deal with another team, as an introduction to phase four, in which, upon familiarizing themselves with different types of business letters and rules of business correspondence, the companies exchanged e-mails to develop and finalize the business deal.

The project culminated in oral presentations prepared by the companies, exhibiting all their activities and transactions. The final presentation also involved the submission of a portfolio containing all the documents generated throughout the simulation: CVs, e-mails and planners, as well as the journals kept by each student during the simulation with the goal of registering their progress in the execution of tasks, consciousness-raising in their process of language learning, as well as improving metacognitive strategies (Oxford and Crookall 1990: 110, Spelman 2002: 381). An explicit focus on the knowledge, content and skills encountered, acquired and used in their work, helped encourage the students to concentrate on specific aspects of learning and elements of achievement (Beckett and Slater 2005: 109-110).

As part of the reflection process on the pedagogic and linguistic effectiveness of the project, the students completed an evaluation questionnaire expressing their attitudes, views and satisfaction on the different aspects and relevance of the simulation in English language learning. The results of this questionnaire were meant to serve as a valuable source of information on the students' expectations and needs and a guideline for further improvement of the program.

Since a detailed analysis of the questionnaire results goes beyond the scope of this paper, we will just briefly summarise its major points. All the students unanimously expressed the utmost satisfaction with the overall success of the project, pointing particularly to the usefulness of the communicative and interactional aspects of the simulation, as well as the effectiveness of cooperation and teamwork. "Learning Business English with ease in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere that looks like a game", "overcoming fear of public speaking", "learning while socializing", "learning formal business terms", "practicing for the future workplace", "acting out the scenarios of the business world"… are just some of the many positive aspects the students referred to in their comments. Questions about the merits of team-building and the value of engaging and helping out the students with lower self-esteem and a lower level of English were also raised by several participants.

The students expressed a high degree of agreement with the statements related to the content relevance, the structure and correspondence of the tasks with both their needs and interests and the course objectives, with strong mean scores of over 4 on a scale from 1, meaning strongly disagree, to 5, meaning strongly agree.

The simulation learning method was found to be useful and interesting by more than 92.6 % of the participants, thus confirming our initial expectations and our desire to create an enjoyable learning experience coupled with feelings of fun and flow. It was preferred to traditional learning methods and was found to be particularly relevant for the acquisition of vocabulary, presentation skills and professional knowledge, once again supporting our original motivation and inspiration in developing and implementing this pilot project.

5. Concluding remarks

Focus on learner autonomy promotion and development, cultivating independence and responsibility, encouraging cooperation and fostering interpersonal skills, the growth of self-esteem and risk-tasking, and appreciation of individual differences in learning styles and strategies, all make simulations a format which brings together many aspects of the holistic and humanistic approach epitomized in experiential learning.

Simulations enable students to play an active role and take control of their learning, make their own decisions on what and how to learn, and effectively use the available resources, information and feedback (Tomlinson and Masuhara 2000: 159). They help them improve their affective, social, cognitive and metacognitive skills, they allow them to identify their dominant learning style, and develop their language learning strategies in planning, organizing and evaluating their learning process (Geddes *et al*. 1990: 82); in other words they build up skills of self-regulating learning. Developing a sense of self-efficacy in students is believed to be an important element of motivation, self-esteem and self-confidence (Dorneyi 2001: 21-2).

Relevance and usefulness for future work, encountering and resolving different communicative situations, meaningful communication, and interactional authenticity are some of the major reasons for the applicability of simulations in English for Specific Purposes. In a simulation, learning is

contextualized, built into the simulation of a real scenario, a target context providing authenticity in terms of purpose, approach, communicative reality, and discourse (Widdowson 1978: 80-81). Using simulations, learning and knowledge are not isolated from the real world, they are made relevant, useful, and functional, related to the world, experiences and interests of the learner, and as such are both purposeful and meaningful (Samuda and Bygate 2008: 20-21). As the focus is more on exchanging meaning and reaching a nonlinguistic outcome than on form and grammar, simulations foster deeper and longer lasting learning leading to fluency development (Hyland 1993: 17).

Simulations allow for the practice, development and integration of all language skills through negotiation and cooperation in conquering different communicative challenges posed by various situations and interactions.

The environment is safe, low-risk, and encouraging, and the presence of a non-linguistic outcome shifts the focus away from the language, inspiring natural interactions and the application of communicative strategies in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere (Scarcella and Crookall 1990: 226), which reduces shyness and self-consciousness and lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1982).

The sense of achievement, creativity, imagination, risk-taking, fun and excitement, and the feeling of "flow" and complete immersion in the activity, all create a state of optimal experience, while teamwork, cooperation and collaboration, all in line with social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978/1997), enable a shared experience of discovery and exploration (Breen & Candlin 1980: 95), peer modeling and knowledge sharing.

Simulations activate learners' analytical and creative, intellectual, social and emotional potential (Crookall and Saunders 1989; Oxford and Crookall 1990) and develop and consolidate both linguistic and professional competences. They are "revitalizing" and "dynamic" (Magnin 2002:395) and a viable alternative to "the talk-and-chalk tradition" (Crookall and Saunders 1989: ix).

This all leads us to the question of motivation, and in the words of Ellis (2005) "engaging learners in activities where they are focused on creating pragmatic meaning is intrinsically motivating", and according to Richards and Rodgers (2001: 207) *"People learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an end in itself"…"People learn a second language most successfully when*

the information they are acquiring is perceived as interesting, useful, and leading to a desired goal" (*Ibid*: 209).

ESP can also gain a great deal from the presence of intrinsic motivation, as besides relevance, it should also include elements of "enjoyment, fun, creativity and a sense of achievement" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 48). Being an active pedagogical approach successful in raising students' interest, stake, engagement and investment in their work, it instills inspiration and motivation and promotes deeper learning (Crookall 1990: 167).

Simulations are an "extremely powerful FL tool" (Crookall and Saunders 1989:97), they create "an environment which encourages interaction and communication" (*Ibid*), "overcoming certain limitations of the classroom as a learning environment" (*Ibid*), "encouraging the students to use FL communicatively, i.e. in a self-initiated and purposeful way" (*Ibid*). In comparison to teacher-centered classroom practices, the language in simulations becomes richer, more spontaneous, with more natural discourse elements, such as turn taking, negotiating, etc, with extensive FL input in an "appealing and relevant context" (*Ibid:* 98), where the anxiety level is lowered as participants are more oriented towards their peers than the teacher (Gardner and Lalonde 1990: 219).

Simulations bridge the gap between theory and practice, knowledge and action which is one of the cornerstones of education aimed at preparing students for the workplace arena. Using simulations, students at the tertiary level of education are given an opportunity to practice "the various multi-faceted, work-related skills that they will require once they enter employment" (Ellington, Gordon and Fowlie 2006: 107), and as "first-hand experience, active involvement and enjoyment underlie all effective learning" (Crookall, Coleman and Versluis 1990: 167), we believe simulations deserve a highly prominent place in teaching English for Specific Purposes.

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