

Teaching Communicative English Language in Non-Native Contexts using Simulations

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Abstract

After graduation, students find themselves confronted with the challenges of the world. These demanding situations expect from students to be proficient enough to be able to cope with them in an intellectually mature way. Trying to recall what they have learnt at school, all what students can think of is how they used to be regarded as passive members in the classroom, which was shaped by the all-time-dominance of the instructor, thus ending up feeling unprepared to face life regardless of the years spent at school and university. Currently, there is a paradigm shift in the roles of both teachers and students. The backbone of the new methodology of teaching is based on a shift from the traditional teacher-centered classroom to the modern student-centered mediums, where the student takes control of the approach while the teacher oversees the flow of the process. In this modern methodology, the student, as an individual learner, is handed the responsibility of self-learning and self-instruction where he/she is ought to explore, indirectly, his attitudes and values. My paper explores, in detail, the theoretical and empirical dimensions of “simulations” which is one of the basic learning activities in communicative English courses.

Keywords: Simulations, Self-learning, Functional English, Independent learning, Classroom application, Real-life practice

Introduction:

Building oral language proficiency is considered a prime responsibility and one of the most challenging tasks that language teachers encounter. As a result, many researchers have thought out of the box and realized that the most efficient way to encourage students to communicate in language classes is to let go of the conventional classroom and shift the focus on authentic settings, which allow opportunities of communication in realistic conditions. Upon creating such learning situations, students will get over the constraints of the classroom and feel more encouraged to communicate thus developing their communicative use of language. This is a key principle of simulations use in language learning.

In their attempt to mimic real-life situations in their language communication classrooms, some teachers go for the easy role-play activities, while others consider that simulations need a

lot of preparation and end up being beyond the capabilities and expectations of students. This view of simulations is comprehensible but not authentic. It is true that simulations require detailed preparation, creative ideas and organized planning; yet, they can be customized to match the needs and circumstances of any group since they can match all levels, shapes and sizes of complexity.

Theoretical approaches

What is a simulation?

Simulations are mainly regarded as a representation of reality that takes place through problem-driven activities. Simulations provide a communicative environment where students get actively engaged, in the form of groups, in a task they have to perform or a problem they have to solve based on predetermined background information and environment. More important, however, is the idea that a simulation becomes reality, and students get actively involved in their roles and the activity they are performing with minimal focus on the environmental details and maximum focus on the language to be produced in that specific real-like context. The major aspect in a simulation, which is an innate benefit of it, is the fact that it fulfills the student's perceptions and need for realism, which is a desire to "relate to life 'out there' beyond the classroom's box-like walls" (McArthur, 1983, p. 101). This fulfilling of needs, in turn, acts as a motivation for both the students and the teacher, especially in EFL situations where English, at its best, is regarded as a differed need. Simulations dismantle the traditional teacher-student relationship in a way that allows students to be in control and take control of their own performance, leading towards "declass rooming" the class (Jones, 1982). Simulations help the learners immerse in and identify with the target culture. Another advantage of simulations is reducing anxiety levels, which is a key element when it comes to language development, (Krashen, 1982).

According to Jones (1982), a simulation is as reality of function in a simulated and structured environment (p. 5). Therefore, and according to this definition, for a simulation to achieve the desired effect, three essential elements need to be fulfilled: Reality of function, simulated environment, and structure.

1. Reality of function: Participants have to accept, mentally and behaviorally, the roles assigned to them in terms of duties and responsibilities as if they were actually those people;
2. Simulated environment: The actions of a task shall be conducted within a self-contained realistic setting, as this helps learners live and accept the role;
3. Structure: Explicit facts shall be given to the participants reflecting the details of the problem or task being simulated, and participants must abide by them without any alteration or invention.

What is the difference between a simulation and role play?

In many cases, teachers often confuse simulations and role plays as these two techniques share a lot in common. The table below summarizes the major differences between simulations and role play according to Bambrough (1994).

Simulations	Role plays
Props are a basic element as they present the environment, and this is why they are provided.	Key aspects of the environment shall be created or imagined by the participants.
Detailed representations are presented in terms of facts due to their major importance in the “Functional” part, (E.g., representations of gender, age, job, status, circumstances, etc.).	Participants are provided with descriptions, and they are required to invent key facts or to act based on specific script or description provided, (E.g., “You are angry because....”).
Behave as themselves (applying their own background and language experiences to situation).	Take part of the character.
Participants can use their imagination but they are not allowed to create or add to the given situation.	Participants are expected to be creative and imaginative when playing the role.
A participant behaves and acts as if found in a real life situation and thus creates a real communication.	A participant acts out a dialogue in a predetermined context or improvises speech in an imaginary one.

Why simulations are important in language teaching?

The technique of simulations is becoming the first choice for EFL/ESL teachers due to the fact that this technique is considered the backbone of an environment which gives learners the opportunity to use language in a creative and communicative way. There are five basic advantages for such technique including:

- a- Motivation: Simulations are a key element in fostering motivation among learners because they ensure purposeful communication, rather than artificial. Throughout simulations, learners are given the opportunity to express freely without being restricted to any dialogue, and what matters for them most is that they reflect their own background, personal experiences, and character when doing so, thus resulting in excitement and interest to share.

- b- Enhanced fluency: According to Allwright (1984), a tenet of communicative teaching is that people learn by doing. The context of simulations itself requires a need of immediate communication, which in turn encourages fluency. Learners find themselves focusing on the situation they are in where their primary aim is to convey a meaning through communication. In such environment, the communication of meaning dominates the practice of language including elements of grammar and pronunciations. In simulations, the use of language is considered as a necessary aspect of the communication to have it occur and not a test of correctness.

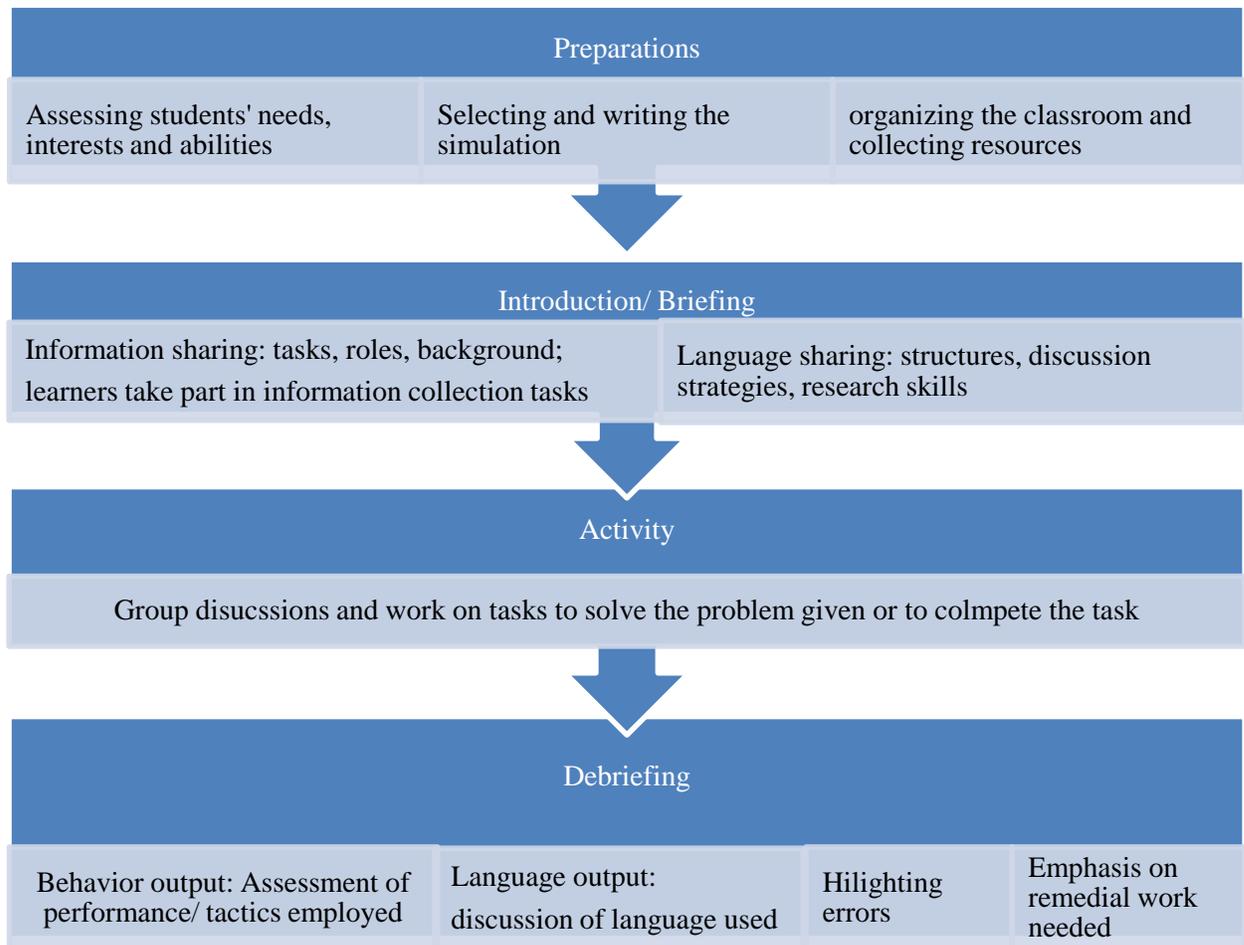
- c- Integration of skills: A basic feature that shall be taken into consideration when applying the communicative methodology in language teaching is having it utilize a range of language skills in realistic situations, or as Littlewood (1981) describes it, it shall be a “whole-task practice” (p. 17). Having said this, simulations as regarded as a medium that allows the opportunity of learning the pragmatic skills of using language, developing non-verbal competency of language and acquiring intercultural and interpersonal competence in a second language. Simulations, on the other hand, also allow the development of cognitive skills including critical thinking, analyzing and evaluating of information. Simulations put the pieces of the puzzle into place by proving for learners that successful communication is the result of a combination of skills.

- d- Active participation: As a matter of fact, learning proves to be more effective when it engages the learners. Simulations lead to effective and efficient learning as they encourage learners to be active and to respond to the situation they are in through communicating and being engaged with their fellow classmates.

- e- Reduced anxiety: Learning a new language is a stressful process, yet simulations reduce the anxiety associated with such experience. The reason behind this is the shift in the roles of students and teachers in the classroom and the way errors are dealt with, in comparison to real world errors. In simulations, learners do not stress about errors they do because they do not get judged or corrected, which results in more self confidence and better levels of achievement on the long run.

How is a simulation organized?

A Simulation is consisted of four sections: preparations, introduction, activity and debriefing.



Empirical approach

Simulations in classroom practice

Simulations can be used in the classroom to cover a wide range of topics and functions. Since the objective of language learners vary, simulations, in turn, vary. Not every simulation can be applied at any proficiency level; this is why teachers shall differentiate between the types of simulations suitable and applicable for each level which are the basic level, intermediate level, and advanced level.

Basic Level

A lot of teachers think twice before they take the initiative to integrate simulations in their language classes for basic level learners as they believe that the process is complex and will not yield, in return, the needed outcomes. One cannot deny that learners at this level do not have

good command of the language, especially the communicative ability of it; however, if provided with comprehensible input, learners can perform beyond any expectation.

Simulations for basic level classes should be straight forward since learners at this level have a narrow range of skills which allow them to communicate. Therefore, straight forward simulations that learners encounter in their daily routine such as greeting people, asking for directions, ordering food at a restaurant, etc. are recommended. To insure the success of simulations at this delicate level of language knowledge, comprehensible input that matches real life shall be provided so that learners can participate successfully in the simulation.

Practical example

This sample simulation is about asking directions. In the briefing stage, the teacher provides comprehensible input about the meaning of basic elements needed for this activity such as directions to reach a street, expressions that reflect movements a person can take to arrive to a destination, gambits that lead to the repetition of a word or a direction and others. These elements can be provided by showing learners visuals such as pictures or video clips.

After briefing, the teacher asks the learners to sit in pairs and provides them with task cards. The teacher explains about the roles and tasks to be applied. Then, the teacher gives learners different maps. For example, the first learners, named as learner 1, will be given a map that includes pictures of buildings and names of several shops, centers, service places and other mark points on it, and the second learner, named as learner 2, will have a map with pictures of these places but with no names along with the list of destinations. A marker in the form of a small car or a man will be given to learner 2. The teacher guides the learners to the starting point on the map.

Learner 2 has to communicate with learner 1 and ask him/her for directions, and learner 1 has to give the directions needed. As a practical example, learner 2 can ask learner 1 “Excuse me, where is XYZ hospital?”, and learner 1 answers, “Go one block and turn right to XYZ road...then go three blocks, you will find it on your left.” After listening to the directions of learner 1, learner 2 moves the marker to the destination as per the directions of learner 1 and stops at the right places. In case learner 2 gets mixed up or forgets the directions, he/she may stop and ask to get the directions to the target destination following the same protocol but through initiating a new conversation, as if he/she meets a new person on the road and asks for directions. In such case, learner 1 shall give new directions based on the new start point that learner 2 reached. Throughout the activity, learner 2 is not allowed to check the details present on the map of learner 1 before he/she actually arrives to it so that the activity sounds realistic since we can never see a destination in real life until we arrive to it.

At this level of language knowledge, learners tend to refer back to their teacher whenever they feel unable to move forward with the activity as they do not know what word to use or what the name of an element is. However, the teacher shall remind the learners that in such simulation,

she/he no more has the role of a teacher and accordingly shall advise them to refer to other learners who are also taking part in the simulation to ask for assistance and negotiate meanings.

Intermediate level

At this level of language proficiency, learners possess language abilities that allow them to participate in more complicated simulations than beginner level participants. Thus, the teacher can implement situations that any person can face in real life such as being a doctor who has to give a prescription to a sick person, being a graduate who has to go through a job interview, being an employee that has to take a certain decision at a company, and others.

For such kind of real-life simulations, the teachers can set the simulation in the form of a scenario, which clearly explains the situation the learners are facing, their roles, tasks, the way they are expected to behave throughout the simulation and the output that they shall come up with at its end. According to Jones (1982, p. 34), the controller should provide enough information for the participants to understand what is involved in the briefing stage and ensure that all required documents are present. It is worth noting that teacher shall stress on the importance of each role, and the importance of accepting it, in addition to the fact that learners shall not play or act, but shall behave as per their role in the simulation.

Practical example

The teacher divides the class into groups each consisting of 4 or 5 learners so that the final number of groups is even. An instructions paper, the scenario, is then distributed for each team so that members can have sufficient information about their roles and tasks and what is expected from them in this simulation. In this real life-like simulation, each group resembles a company specialized in selling origami papers with instructions, the target market of these origami papers are children. When following the instructions, children end up having a variety of designs and characters out of the papers. Each group, being an origami paper company, is given a label such as the A company, the B company, or even the teacher can give learners the opportunity to choose their own company names. Each learner shall wear a tag name that specifies his/her role at the company, such as marketing director, creative team manager, technical assistant and other, and learners shall behave and act based on these roles.

After sharing the scenario, each company is given 5 papers. Three of these papers shall be used by the learners to make a creative origami shape or design out of it (for example a candy box, a dragon, a car); one paper shall be used to list the instructions to be followed to get the creative shape, and one paper shall be used to write a business letter on it. The business letter shall follow a certain format previously explained by the teacher. Each two groups exchange the business letters and the instructions, and try to follow the instructions of the other company to check if they were accurate enough in their instructions. Companies use the fifth paper to write a letter back to the collaborating company commenting on the instructions and the design. As a final step, both companies set a meeting and discuss the final design to be applied.

Throughout the simulation, the teacher takes the role of an observer only. He/she can move around taking notes about learners' error and weaknesses to be shared with them in the debriefing stage. As an assessment, learners can write an essay describing their experience in the origami company in terms of group work and cooperation, autonomous learning, and the reflection on the simulation as a whole. During the debriefing part, the teacher can point out the points of strength and weakness each learner had. In other words, the teacher can comment on the verbal and non-verbal skills in terms of language use and communication aside to group work and interaction.

Advanced level

Although learners at this stage do not have a proficiency level that matches that of native speakers of the language, yet they are able to communicate successfully in most real-life situations they encounter. The choice of simulations at this level has no limitations as the teacher can adapt any real-life situation and adopt it to its class, as long as this simulation can add to the learners' knowledge of language and move them a step forward in mastering it.

Practical example

In the briefing stage, the teacher sets the frame of the simulation by explaining the scenario in the form of a paragraph to be distributed for each and every learner. The scenario states that there is a radio show that will take place on a certain date and time, and that the show will be a debate about a topic, which is death penalty. In the briefing stage, participants are informed about their roles and tasks: who they are going to be and what stand they shall take.

During this activity, learners have to be allocated roles such as a judge, a lawyer, the mother of a victim, human rights activist, the father of a criminal sentenced to death, a government representative, and others. Based on the allocated role, each learner shall do his own research, using online resources and offline resources, if available; to gather information that support his role and the position he/she stands for, that is with or against the death penalty. On the debate day, each learner is given time to present his argument along with the supporting information, facts, and statistics. After presenting, learners proceed to asking questions and commenting.

Throughout the debate, the teacher takes the role of a moderator doing the radio show ensuring a smooth transition in turns and making sure that each learner is given the time and chance to defend his argument. Moreover, the teacher can make use of a cam recorder or simply a mobile phone to take a video of the debate for later use.

After the simulation activity, learners can be assessed by being asked to write an argumentative essay about the topic based on the discussion that took place during the radio show simulation. In the debriefing stage, the teacher may replay the video and highlight points of

weakness and strengths that learners had; moreover, the class may have an open discussion about their success or failure in proving their argument.

Conclusion

Integrating simulations in language classes engages the learners in first-hand experiences of knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, bridges the gap between the classroom world and the real-life experiences that students encounter. When students are given the chance to experience autonomous learning, they obtain empowerment and inspiration. There is no doubt that integrating simulations is challenging and demanding due to the time it requires to be developed and prepared, yet, it is certainly worth doing due to the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that both teachers and students get from it. It is time to leave behind the boring drills, useless memorization, and endless strings of grammatical rules and shift towards modern language acquisition.

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