Role Playing/Simulation

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Role playing/simulation is an extremely valuable method for L2 learning. It encourages thinking and creativity, lets students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively nonthreatening setting, and can create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur. This paper will examine this technique in detail.

There is little consensus on the terms used in the role playing and simulation literature. Just a few of the terms which are used, often interchangeably, are "simulation," "game," "role-play," "simulation-game," "role-play simulation," and "role-playing game" (Crookall and Oxford, 1990a). There does seem to be some agreement, however, that simulation is a broader concept than role playing. Ladousse (1987), for example, views simulations as complex, lengthy and relatively inflexible, but role playing as quite simple, brief and flexible. Simulations simulate real life situations, while in role playing the participant is representing and experiencing some character type known in everyday life (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). Simulations always include an element of role play(Ladousse, 1987).

In this paper, the role playing/simulation method will be analyzed using the following format described by Richards and Rodgers (1986):

- Approach
  - Theory of language
  - Theory of language learning
- Design
  - Objectives of the method
  - Syllabus model
  - Learning & teaching activities
  - Learner roles
  - Teacher roles
  - Role of instructional materials
- Procedure
  - Classroom techniques, designs and procedures

Approach

Theory of language

Richards and Rodgers (1986) examine three theoretical views of language: structural, functional and interactional. The role playing/simulation method follows from the interactional view. This view "sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals.... Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of learners as interactors." (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 17).

Role playing/simulation clearly promotes effective interpersonal relations and social transactions among participants. "In order for a simulation to occur the participants must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions, and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves" (Jones, 1982, p. 113). To fulfill their role responsibilities, students must relate to others in the simulation, utilizing effective social skills.

Christopher and Smith (1990) show how language teaching content in simulations may be either specified or left unspecified, by distinguishing between "convergent" and "divergent" models. When the convergent model is used, the patterns of exchange in the simulation are specified. When the divergent model is used, the patterns of exchange are left unspecified. A few of the specific differences are shown in this table:

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          Convergent model                     Divergent model
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        "This is the problem;                 "This is the situation;
          how shall we solve it?"                what will we do?"
   The action has a "past."           The action takes place "on stage."
      Roles are given in detail.          Roles have no constraints.
    The organizer processes the action.  No formal steps or sequences.
    Focus on "what will happen?"          Focus on what the players do.
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Theory of language learning

Scarcella and Crookall (1990) review research to show how simulation facilitates second language acquisition. Three learning theories which they discuss are that learners acquire language when: (1) they are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, (2) they are actively involved, and (3) they have positive affect (desires, feelings and attitudes).

Comprehensible input is provided in simulations because students engage in genuine communication in playing their roles. Active involvement stems from participation in worthwhile, absorbing interaction which tends to make students forget they are learning a new language. Students have the opportunity to try out new behaviors in a safe environment, which helps them develop long term motivation to master an additional language. In addition to encouraging genuine communication, active involvement, and a

positive attitude, the simulated "real life" problems help students develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Design

Objectives of the method

Cummings and Genzel (1990) state that the first step in designing a simulation is to decide upon game criteria. They give, as an example of a general objective: "I want my students to become more comfortable when visiting restaurants or to be more at ease in business situations, such as negotiating a contract." Specific objectives, such as "I want my students to know how to give their orders in fast food restaurants," are refined from these general objectives.

Syllabus model

The syllabus model could be a combination of "procedural" and "process." In early simulations, the learner's own activities are central to learning but the tasks should be chosen by the teacher, thus following Skehan's (1998a) definition of a procedural syllabus. For example, an early "ice breaking" game, such as the "Famous People" game described by Ladousse (1987), can introduce the students to simple role playing. In this simple guessing game, a student volunteer adopts the role of a famous person. Other students ask questions of the volunteer in order to guess his or her identity. Games which follow the ice breaker would involve more complexity, but still conform to the procedural model.

Later in the class, however, a simulation which takes place over several periods might follow the process model, allowing learners to control the nature of the interactions that take place (Skehan, 1998a). This could be done, for example, through a "design competition" (Ladousse, 1987). In this simulation students design a simulation which is relevant to them. They decide on the event to be simulated, choose a relevant issue within the event to explore, identify roles of participants, etc.

Learning and teaching activities

The role playing/simulation method (especially when the "convergent" model is used) meets Skehan's (1998b) four criteria for task-based instruction: meaning is primary; there is a goal which needs to be worked towards; the activity is outcome-evaluated; there is a real-world relationship. The activities in class, therefore, do not focus on language itself, but on the goals and activities that may be defined by the teacher (if a procedural syllabus is used) or the students (if a process syllabus is used).

Sadow (1987) gives an interesting example of student and teacher activities in a simple role play. The teacher tells the class that they are extraterrestrials who, for the first time, are coming into contact with earthly objects such as toothbrushes, watches, lightbulbs and

keys. Without reference to human civilization, the participants must draw conclusions about the objects' function. This role play, or similar creative, imaginative activities, will stimulate students to use their imagination and challenge them to think and speak as well.

In more complex simulations the activities of the teacher may be more detailed and student activities may be more defined. The teacher might, for example, explain a handout or have the students read a case study defining the situation, and role play cards (which describe the role which the student is to play) might be distributed. Such simulations can be applied to teaching language in many areas, such as technical English (Hutchinson and Sawyer-Laucanno, 1990), business and industry (Brammer and Sawyer-Laucanno, 1990), and international relations (Crookall, 1990). Indeed, Pennington (1990) even includes role playing/simulation as part of a professional development program for language teachers themselves.

Learner roles

Traditionally, learner roles have been specifically defined in the role playing/simulation method, either through verbal instructions or role cards. However, Kaplan (1997) argues against role-plays that focus solely on prescriptive themes emphasizing specific fields of vocabulary, as they do not capture the spontaneous, real-life flow of conversation.

Perhaps a better model for learner roles in the role playing/simulation method is Scarcella and Oxford's (1992) "tapestry approach." Learners, according to this approach, should be active and have considerable control over their own learning. The students should help select themes and tasks and provide teachers with details of their learning process. In role playing/simulation, this can be achieved through the "design competition" mentioned above, or similar "divergent" simulations.

Students have some new responsibilities in role playing/simulation that they might not be accustomed to. Burns and Gentry (1998), looking at undergraduates learning experientially, suggest that some have not been exposed to experiences requiring them to be proactive and to make decisions in unfamiliar contexts. They recommend that instructors understand the knowledge level that students bring to the scene, and place close attention to the introduction of experiential exercises so that the student does not become discouraged. This advice seems even more relevant for L2 learners, who may be from a culture in which teacher-centered classrooms are the rule, and who may have knowledge gaps that make a simulation difficult and threatening.

Teacher roles

The teacher defines the general structure of the role play, but generally does not actively participate once the structure is set. To quote Jones (1982), "...the teacher becomes the Controller, and controls the event in the same way as a traffic controller, helping the flow of traffic and avoiding bottlenecks, but not telling individuals which way to go." Again, this is consistent with Scarcella and Oxford's (1992) principles. Rather than a traditional, teacher- centered classroom structure, the teacher keeps a relatively low profile and

students are free to interact with each other spontaneously. This reduces student anxiety and facilitates learning.

The teacher must take on some additional responsibilities in role playing/simulation. In particular, the teacher must keep learners motivated by stimulating their curiosity and keeping the material relevant, creating a "tension to learn" (Burns and Gentry, 1998).

Role of instructional materials

As simulations represent real-world scenarios, materials should simulate the materials that would be used in the real world. For example, blocks or sugar cubes can be employed in simulating a construction task. In the "extraterrestrial" role play mentioned above, toothbrushes, watches, lightbulbs and keys can be examined by the "aliens."

An even more extreme example of a simulation resembling real life and using real life materials is given by Kaplan (1997), who argues that "coping with unpredictability and building confidence cannot happen solely through discrete exercises, but require real and complete events." To accomplish this she describes a simulation called "The Reception Game," designed for students learning French as a foreign language before being assigned to a job in a French-speaking country. The simulation centers around the presentation of a buffet luncheon for native speakers of French in the Washington area. The students plan and host the luncheon, interact with French speakers during the luncheon, and meet with the guests afterwards in a debriefing session. Written self-assessment observations and evaluations of this simulation were very favorable, students stating that the activity boosted their confidence in speaking French.

One problem in instructional materials is what Skehan (1998a) calls the "conspiracy of uniformity" which publishers have created. The "design competition" simulation discussed above is one way to avoid this problem by adapting material to the needs of individual learners. Simulations designed by students themselves can be used in both their class and future classes.

Procedure

Classroom techniques, practices and behaviors

The role playing/simulation procedure described here uses Ladousse's (1987) format applied to "The Island Game," a simulation described by Crookall and Oxford (1990b). Ladousse views procedure as one of 11 factors in role plays. These factors are: level, time, aim, language, organization, preparation, warm-up, procedure, follow-up, remarks and variations. Various role playing exercises are then described in terms of these factors.

Level indicates the minimum (and sometimes maximum) level at which the activity can be carried out. Time may depend on whether students need to read articles, reports, etc.

Aim indicates the broader objective of each activity, such as developing confidence or becoming sensitive to concepts expressed in language.

Language indicates the language the students will need, such as structures, functions, different skills, work with register, or intonation patterns. Organization describes whether the activity involves pair work or group work, and in the latter case, how many students should be in each group. Preparation indicates anything that needs to be done before class. Warm-up involves ideas to focus the students' attention and get them interested.

Procedure involves a step-by-step guide to the activity. Richards (1985), for example, recommends a six step procedure for role playing: preliminary activity, a model dialogue, learning to perform the role play with the help of role cards, listening to recordings of native speakers performing the role play with role cards, follow-up, and repeating the sequence. However, many role playing/simulation procedures do not follow these steps (nor should they conform to such restrictive guidelines, according to such researchers as Kaplan, 1997). Follow-up indicates activities that are done after the activity, perhaps as homework. Remarks may be of general interest or may be warnings about special difficulties that may arise. Variations can be used with different types of classes or different levels.

To give an example of how this procedure can be followed in class, I will apply Ladousse's 11 factors to Crookall and Oxford's (1990b) "Island Game." The "Island Game" is both an extended ice- breaker and collective decision-making activity which can help develop a range of skills in the target language. The simulated situation is one in which the group has been stranded on an island. A volcano will erupt in 30-60 minutes, so an escape plan must be implemented quickly. There are lifeboats to carry all to safety on neighboring islands, but an overall group consensus must be reached on who will go where, with whom, etc. The procedure is shown in the following figure:

Level:
    Advanced
Time:
    11/2 hours for the main game, 1 hour for follow-up
Aim:
    Ice breaking, developing skills in decision making and cooperation.
Language:
    Language skills are used to reveal things about oneself, express agreement and disagreement, persuade, defend a point of view, elicit cooperation, analyze data, and make judgments. Different skills are enhanced such as listening, understanding directions, initiating, speaking, writing and reading.
Organization:
    Whole class and small groups of 3-7 students.
Preparation and Warm-up:

Procedure:

Students must not talk. They are given information on lifeboat numbers and capacities, neighboring islands, etc. Each student must complete a "personal profile" with accurate information on sex, age, nationality, background, employment, practical skills, etc., and with the top three preferred islands indicated.

The group makes decisions to reach a consensus. The teacher makes sure that everyone stands up and moves around. Changes can be made (such as boats being declared unseaworthy, or islands declared out of bounds) when a group seems to have made a decision "too easily." The time until the volcano explodes is periodically written on the board.

Follow-up:

Small groups rank order and discuss the five main factors that led to their decisions about forming groups, choosing islands and escape boats, etc.

Variation:

Each group develops a society on its new island, complete with a political structure. They draw up a set of guidelines, or constitution, for the community.

Other examples of role playing/simulation, such as the famous people role play, extraterrestrial game, reception game, and design competition, have already been mentioned.

Here are five more brief examples from Ladousse (1987):

1. What do I look like? Students, in turn, try on props and accessories such as a white coat, glasses, wig and hat. The other students comment on their changed appearance. Follow-up discussion can focus on uniforms we wear in our daily lives.
2. Picture role plays. Students identify with persons in photographs, write his/her imaginary biography, and interview each other in their roles. This provides practice in simple past tense.
3. Neighbors: may I borrow? Students practice making polite requests. They are given picture cards showing cooking ingredients that they either need or have a lot of. They explain what they are cooking, and must borrow ingredients from each other.
4. Group improvisation. Two students improvise a scene, and others join and leave the improvisation, tying their roles and exit into the improvisation. As with the "design competition," this follows the unstructured, "divergent" model.
5. Role switching. Students role play persons in a conflict. On the teacher's signal, roles are switched. Discussion can center on how strong emotions are expressed in different cultures.

In conclusion, when the role playing/simulation technique is employed, it should be integrated with other language learning activities, given the preparation and care which is

required in any language learning method, and adapted to student needs and level. If these guidelines are followed, it can be a rewarding experience for both the students and teacher.

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