

Using a simulation in an ESL classroom: A descriptive analysis

Carrie S. Y. Jung
Capilano College

Helen Levitin
University of British Columbia

The article describes a simulation that was used in an English as a second language class designed for Southeast Asian government officials enrolled in an English language and Canadian cultural immersion program. The two authors are teachers from Canada who were seconded by the Regional English Language Centre in Singapore to teach in the 3-month, intensive English for International Communication Program. The teachers felt that simulations would enable students to integrate language and communication skills with the knowledge that they had gained concerning cultural aspects of Canadian society. This article describes a courtroom simulation and provides information concerning the preparations for the activity, the simulation itself, and the students' responses to and perceptions of the activity. A questionnaire was circulated after the simulation, and the results obtained are also discussed. The authors conclude that simulations are a valuable and stimulating language learning tool.

KEYWORDS: *Association of Southeast Asian Nations; Canadian International Development Agency; communication skills; cultural knowledge; English as a foreign language; intensive English; language skills; simulation.*

This article describes one of three simulations that were used in an English as a second language program that ran from June 9 to September 6, 1997. This program was one of many such 3-month courses designed for Southeast Asian government ministry officials who had been selected to study at the Regional English Language Centre (RELC).

Located in Singapore, RELC was established by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). It "provides leadership to develop expertise and excellence in the field of language education and promotes cooperation and contact among language professionals in the region and beyond" (see the SEAMEO Web page at http://www.relc.org.sg/about_frame.htm). RELC also engages in research, language consultancy, and language teaching, and it holds international, jointly funded language-training programs.

The English for International Communication (EIC) program belongs in the latter category. Jointly funded by the Singapore government and by the Canadian International Development Agency, the EIC program was created to assist various Southeast Asian nations that were poised to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations by helping course participants from these countries develop and upgrade their English

language skills. Another goal of this program is to expose the students to various aspects of Canadian society, and for this reason, two of the instructors in every EIC program are hired from Canada.

Curriculum

The EIC classes described in this article consisted of a morning and afternoon component. The morning classes, described in the next paragraph, were 3 hours per day and integrated all language skills, with an emphasis on oral communication. The 2-hour afternoon component consisted of a variety of classes, including pronunciation (with work in the language lab), writing, and presentation skills.

For the morning classes, course participants were supplied with materials prepared by RELC specifically for the EIC program. The materials were theme based, with each theme accompanied by vocabulary exercises and grammar items that progressed in difficulty. There was a total of 15 themes, or units, focusing on the following topics: family, people, work, shopping, leisure, food, health, travel, culture, economics and trade, environment, law and administration, education, information technology, and science and technology. Grammar items included present tense statements with “be” (in Unit 1), “wh” questions (in Unit 4), imperatives and prepositions of place (in Unit 8), and phrasal verbs (in Unit 12).

In addition to these materials, the two morning instructors prepared various supplementary teaching materials and designed classroom activities to meet the specific needs and goals of the students.

Student population

The EIC program described in this article was composed of 31 students: 14 from Cambodia, 10 from Vietnam, and 7 from Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Twenty-seven students were male, and 4 were female. Their ages ranged from the early 20s to the mid-40s. All course participants were officials representing a variety of government ministries.

Their proficiency in English ranged from low beginner to low advanced; some of the course members had studied English at the university level, whereas others had had only a few months of training in English prior to entering the program. Before their arrival in Singapore, they were assigned to one of two classes to ensure cultural and linguistic diversity.

Rationale

To achieve the objectives of this program, that is, develop and upgrade the English language skills of the participants as well as expose them to cultural aspects of Canadian society, the authors had to decide what learning experiences would achieve these objectives.

According to Kolb (1984), "Essentially, learning takes place through the experiences which the learner has; that is, through the reactions he makes to the environment in which he is placed" (p. 63). The two morning instructors of this program felt that introducing simulations to the EIC classes would be a means of providing this environment, thereby forcing the students to "create their own communication realities" (Crookall & Oxford, 1990, p. 20), that is, fully use the vocabulary, content, and concepts that were taught in the program. Indeed, according to Crookall and Oxford, simulations provide the environment in which the culture of the target language can be experienced; they generate a "reciprocal relationship between culture and communication" (p. 21).

Thus, three simulations were designed for the students. The first was done after the unit on economics and trade, and the second was held after the unit on health. Both of these simulations were in the form of group presentations. The simulation described in this article, a civil court trial, was the third, following the unit on law and administration. Each was introduced in the second half of the course, when the students had already had considerable exposure to grammar and learned vocabulary specific to the various themes and had had numerous opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in English.

The authors felt that simulations would enable the students to integrate the language and communication skills that they had learned in the course. Whereas class work from the unit on law and administration offered them insight into the Canadian and American judicial systems, the simulation would give them an opportunity to experience the proceedings of a civil court trial.

Briefing

Prior to participating in the courtroom simulation, the students worked with the prepared materials for the unit on law and administration. This included short reading passages concerning legal and administrative issues, vocabulary exercises, and grammar practice. After these materials had been covered, the instructors presented the students with an article from a local newspaper that described the case of a woman (the defendant) fighting her bank's (the plaintiff) attempt to repossess her home. In addition to providing insight into a current event in Singapore, the article provided an opportunity for the instructors to discuss civil trials, reinforce vocabulary from the unit on law and administration, and teach new vocabulary in context. The authenticity of the case heightened the students' interest in the subject matter.

Preparation for the simulation involved several steps, including extensive supplementary materials that the instructors produced. These included answering reading comprehension questions and completing a flow chart that showed the chronology of events of the case. The students were given a glossary of courtroom vocabulary, including such terms as *to testify* and *verdict*. They also received descriptions of courtroom proceedings, the roles and duties of court officials, and the job descriptions for the roles they would assume in the simulation.

When the students had become familiar with these concepts, they viewed a Hollywood production of a courtroom drama to observe the proceedings in a courtroom in the United States. However, as both the instructors in this program are from Canada, after discussing the differences between the judicial systems and courtroom proceedings of the two countries, they planned the simulation following the Canadian court system.

The next step involved selection of roles. A sign-up sheet was circulated, and the course participants were free to choose any of the roles, ranging from judge and lawyer to court official, witness, and juror. The 30 students (1 could not participate because he left the country temporarily) selected their roles according to their own interests. The case described in the newspaper article provided the framework of the simulation activity. Thus, certain roles, such as the members of the legal teams, the jurors, courtroom officials, and key witnesses (e.g., Mrs. Chia, the woman at the center of the case, and a mortgage lawyer from the bank), were anticipated. However, the students' own ingenuity and creativity furnished the other roles. For example, one of the students assumed the role of hairdresser to Mrs. Chia, whereas another played the role of a former friend. The role of judge, refused by the students, was played by one of the instructors, and the other instructor was the "director" and video camera operator.

Other than the information from the case itself, little direct instruction as to the proceedings of the trial was given to the students. They were given 2 hours of class time to prepare for the simulation, and the remainder of the preparation was done as homework over the period of 1 week.

The simulation

On the day of the simulation, the classroom was arranged to resemble a courtroom. The props included the judge's bench, tables for the two legal teams, jury box, witness stand, and a general seating area for the various witnesses. Microphones were placed on the tables for the two legal teams and in the witness stand, and a video camera was set up to record the proceedings.

Drawing from their previous knowledge and what they had learned in class, the students immersed themselves fully in their roles. After the judge had introduced the case, the two legal teams gave their opening arguments, and the trial began, with witnesses being called and questioned, the legal teams debating points, and the judge offering comments when required. Throughout the trial, the jury members made notes for their deliberations. With only minor input from the director, the simulation proceeded smoothly and became an environment in which the students were creating their own "communication realities" (Crookall & Oxford, 1990, p. 20). Because the instructors did not wish to interrupt the flow of the simulation, they did not attempt any language correction.

The court trial was videotaped, but the presence of the video camera and the instructor operating it did not seem to affect the students' performance during the simulation.

Indeed, so immersed were they in the mock trial that they completely ignored the camera.

Highlights of the simulation

Collaboration and spontaneity characterized the simulation. Placed in the role of adversary to each other, each legal team and its respective witnesses shared a common goal and thus collaborated closely to prepare for the simulation. For example, the lawyers had to prepare evidence to present at the trial, and the witnesses had to prepare their testimonies for the question period. Because both teams consisted of members from mixed language backgrounds, the students were required to use English to communicate with one another.

Spontaneity was the other main characteristic of the simulation. Both unanticipated evidence and unanticipated witnesses were presented at the trial. For example, the plaintiff (i.e., the bank) presented a letter written by the husband of Mrs. Chia that clearly showed she had been aware of his business affairs; the veracity and acceptability of this piece of evidence was furiously objected to by the defendant (i.e., Mrs. Chia). The debate and the judge's subsequent intervention clearly could not have been anticipated, but it required immediate and spontaneous response. The introduction of unanticipated witnesses, such as Mrs. Chia's hairdresser and a former friend, again required quick and creative response and at the same time injected humor into the trial.

The cross-examination periods raised questions that forced the witnesses to extemporize and provide responses that were consistent with their testimonies, whereas the lawyers had to be ready to object and provide reasons for their objections. Thus, constant debating between the two legal teams occurred, and the judge's legal expertise was frequently called on. There was no doubt that the students were genuinely involved in the simulation, and throughout, they had to use vocabulary appropriately, remain consistent with the facts of the case, behave appropriately in the courtroom, and use English.

Weaknesses of the simulation

As a classroom activity, simulations may be a novel experience for students learning English, and their struggle to comprehend the activity may be as difficult as their struggle to engage in it. Moreover, simulations require considerable time and effort on the part of the instructors. Preparation is extensive and time-consuming, and in English programs that are short term, a simulation such as this mock trial would not be feasible. Furthermore, a courtroom simulation requires that the instructors have some knowledge of judicial systems and court proceedings. The complexity of this activity demands much from the participants as well: The students should have a strong grasp of English.

For some of the students in this EIC program, the Canadian and American legal systems would have been completely foreign, and this unfamiliarity might have influenced their selection of their roles or hindered their performance during the

simulation. Furthermore, it is likely that some students had chosen the role of juror to avoid the need to use much English.

During the preparation stage, when the students were working on their own, the instructors were unable to monitor them. Thus, it is unknown to what extent all students contributed to the preparations and the extent to which English was used. It can be assumed that English had been used at least some of the time, as collaboration occurred among students from different language backgrounds.

During the mock trial, it was clear that participation was unequal: The jury members were less active and did not have any major speaking role, whereas members of the legal teams had more opportunities not only to speak but also to immerse themselves fully in their roles.

Finally, a few more points need to be raised. It must be remembered that the instructors are not legal experts and that their knowledge of courtroom proceedings and legal vocabulary was basic. Their attempt to simulate a civil trial was primarily to give students an interesting and stimulating opportunity to use English and learn about an aspect of Canadian society; the purpose of this simulation was not to teach students about law.

Another point that must be mentioned about the use of simulations in a language class is that not all students may perceive the value of such activities. They may perceive simulations as time-consuming and not serious. They may also question the unequal participation that sometimes characterizes simulations.

Debriefing

The debriefing part of the simulation took the form of a questionnaire. In addition to being a language exercise for the students, the objective of the questionnaire was to determine how the participants felt about using simulations to learn English as well as provide the students with an opportunity to reflect on the simulation as a tool for language learning.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections, some of which were completed by all of the participants and some of which were completed only by the students who had assumed certain roles. The questions pertained to the following: the students' (a) understanding of the case and the proceedings of the trial, (b) preparation for the simulation, (c) feelings about their performance in their roles, (d) use of the communication skills and language acquired from class work, and (e) perception of the value of simulations versus learning in other contexts.

In reviewing the questionnaire, the authors of this article focussed on items that reflected the students' understanding, their use of communication skills and language, and their perception of the value of the simulation. Of the 30 students who participated in the simulation, 27 completed the questionnaire.

In response to the question of whether they had gained an understanding of the Canadian judicial system, 16 responded in the affirmative, 7 did not respond to this item, 3 responded in the negative, and 1 was ambivalent. As one student commented,

“This simulation game was good for us. (I)n this mock trial helped us in strengthening our knowledge.” However, another student commented, “I think that the participants [students] needed to be equipped with more knowledge of law before the simulation to facilitate their participating.”

Two of the items focussed on how this simulation helped students acquire language skills. One of these items concerned content-specific vocabulary, and the other concerned listening skills.

With regard to vocabulary, a majority of the students, 22 out of 27, indicated that the simulation helped them learn vocabulary from the fields of law and administration, whereas 5 did not respond to this item. One comment offered by a student reads, “After I finished to participate in this mock trial, I felt that it could help to understand . . . about the new vocabulary.” In the same vein, one student wrote, “Some words in this simulation was very useful but we can’t remember well, so, after we participated this game, our remember is more.” Another student wrote, “I would like to joint this mock trial because it can help me to improve English and especially, this is a good way to learn the real English in specific field.”

With regard to the question whether this simulation helped the students improve their listening skills, 20 responded in the affirmative, 5 did not respond, and 2 gave a negative response. Yet another student wrote, “Being a witness, I learned a lot of vocabulary, *listen* [italics added], speaking and especially to express my opinions and contradict.”

Two other items in the questionnaire pertained to the students’ perception of the value of the simulation versus other contexts as a language learning tool. One of the questions asked them to indicate whether they preferred to learn vocabulary through simulations or reading exercises. The responses showed that many of the students did not understand this question as an either-or question. Regarding simulations as the preferred tool, 19 responded yes, 2 said no, 5 did not respond, and 1 person wrote “both.” Regarding reading exercises as the preferred tool, 16 responded yes, 4 indicated no, 5 did not respond, and 2 again wrote “both.”

The second question asked whether students preferred to work on listening skills through simulations or some other contexts (such as the language lab or classroom). Like the above question, the responses showed that many of the students did not understand this question as an either-or question. Twenty out of 27 indicated that they preferred simulations, 2 did not, and 5 did not respond. Regarding more traditional language learning contexts, 16 responded yes, 4 responded in the negative, and 7 did not respond to this item.

Evaluation of student responses in questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire provided the instructors with feedback about the value of simulations in an ESL class and enabled them to assess how simulations helped to achieve the objectives of the EIC program. As previously mentioned, these

objectives were twofold: to develop and upgrade the English language skills of the participants and to expose them to cultural aspects of Canadian society.

With regard to the second of these objectives, the finding shows that this simulation helped most of the students gain an understanding of the Canadian judicial system. By providing an unfamiliar cultural environment in which students experienced and negotiated meaning in a real-life situation, the simulation helped enhance what they learn about aspects of another culture.

Feedback from the questionnaires also provided insight into the value of this simulation in fulfilling the first objective, that of developing and upgrading English language skills. The students' responses to the items concerning vocabulary and listening skills indicated that they valued both the simulation and traditional language learning contexts (classroom, language lab).

Overall, in evaluating the students' responses in the questionnaire, the instructors feel that the following comments are encouraging. "It's helpful to students to practice their English and makes them more confident in talking or presenting their expression," one wrote. Another student wrote that "it is good for us and we can get experience, if we could do and try." More revealing, another student wrote, "This mock trial is interesting exercise because it help me try to think conversation among my classmates. As it is the simulation, I don't afraid about it and it encouraged me to speak and think."

Concluding remarks

Clearly, with this group of participants, simulations are a valuable and stimulating language learning tool. The instructors acknowledge that the lack of homogeneity in the students' English language proficiency and the time constraints may have weakened this simulation; as previously mentioned, for example, students who had assumed the role of jurors may not have benefited to the same degree as other students. Nevertheless, we strongly feel that simulations greatly enhance language learning.

In preparing the students for this simulation, we trusted that they would work on their own. Without providing much intervention, we were confident that the students had understood the task, and we anticipated that they would work hard to achieve their goals. To our delight, immersed in their roles, the students used vocabulary in the appropriate contexts, practiced their oral and aural skills, and generated their own scripts. Unable to anticipate fully what other role players would say or do, they were required to respond extemporaneously—a simulation of a real-life context.

The degree of excitement observed in the students during the preparation and in the courtroom exceeded our expectations. The creativity of the students in fabricating the evidence and generating the witness roles was testament to their commitment and efforts. The roles were performed with enthusiasm. The fact that their discussions continued even after the trial had ended showed how immersed they had become; for the students, the simulation had become a reality. As one student trenchantly wrote, "The

witnesses played their roles very well and naturally. Two legal teams were trying hard to complete their job. For some, the tension in the court was as high as in a real court.”

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Carrie S. Y. Jung has taught English as a second/foreign language for more than 15 years. She currently lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she works with both international and immigrant/refugee students. Her areas of expertise include English for academic purposes, especially the teaching of writing, business English, and public speaking skills. She has taught in various countries, including Czechoslovakia, Singapore, and Japan. She has a BA (in English literature and psychology) and an MA (in social and educational studies) and holds a diploma in TESL. Previous publications include two coauthored textbooks and two articles in the field of ESL. Professional affiliations include membership in British Columbia Teachers of English as an Additional Language.

Helen Levitin has taught English as a second/foreign language for longer than she cares to admit. She currently lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she works at the English Language Institute at the University of British Columbia. Her areas of expertise include English for specific purposes, business English, international communication skills, and telling jokes. She has taught in various countries, mainly Israel. She has a BA (in English literature) and an M.Ed. (in supervision and administration of international schools) and holds a diploma in TESL. This is her first foray into the field of publication. Professional affiliations include membership in British Columbia Teachers of English as an Additional Language and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Her current area of interest is the use of drama in the ESL classroom.

ADDRESSES: CSYJ: *English as a Second Language Department, and Community Development & Outreach Department, Capilano College, 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, BC, Canada, V7J 3H5; telephones: +1 604-731-3730 (home) and +1 604-986-1911 (work); fax: +1 604-984-1785; e-mail: cjung@capcollege.bc.ca. HL: English Language Institute, Centre for Continuing Education, University of British Columbia, 2121 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z4; telephones: +1 604-874-7367 (home) and +1 604-822-1444 (work); fax: +1 604-822-1579; e-mail: helenlevitin@ubc.ca.*