A CASE STUDY ON SIMULATION AND ROLE PLAYING IN AN ONLINE LSP COURSE

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Summary : The present article illustrates an experiment in the field of online language learning which shows a possible connection between the use of simulation, the teaching of LSP and some of the results of the research in the field of computer assisted language learning.

Riassunto: Il presente contributo illustra un esperimento di istruzione linguistica avanzata a distanza e mette in evidenza la relazione tra l'utilizzo della simulazione con alcuni dei risultati della ricerca nella didattica delle lingue in rete.

Key words: Computer assisted language learning, online language learning, simulation, language for specific purposes

Parole chiave: istruzione linguistica, simulazione, Lsp

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1 - LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AND SIMULATION

In this first part we will argue that, given the nature of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses, simulation is a natural, easy and economic strategy to deal with (online) instruction in this field of Language Learning.

1.1 - Language for Specific Purpose

Broadly speaking, LSP refers to "the teaching and research of language in relation to the communicative needs of speakers of a second language in facing a particular workplace, academic, or professional context. In such contexts language is used for a limited range of communicative events. (…) LSP courses usually focus on the specific language needs of fairly homogeneous groups of learners in regard to one particular context referred to as the target situation." (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004). Moreover, "LSP is a very good situation in which to apply the communicative approach because training intertwines linguistic and professional goals, on the one hand, and knowledge and know-how, on the other hand" (Chanier, 1996).

Both quotations contain a set of related hints and elements which seem to prove that simulation is a suitable strategy for LSP learning and teaching. The first point is that specific language has a "limited range": the definite and limited set of linguistic items involved makes it easy to create an artificial setting for the instruction. In professional life, in fact, a target situation requires a limited set of discrete linguistic items to be dealt with. Another relevant point, which both definitions

stress, is the communicative and pragmatic nature of LSP; again, language for specific purposes is used to communicate in a real and limited context. For example, a medical emergency is a situation that is dealt with mainly through a set of standard procedures which require a standardised language and a fixed set of linguistic items (formulae, lexis etc.).

It is worth remembering that the "communicative approach" is only one among a number of other approaches for language teaching/learning, although it is at currently the leading one (Gruba, 2004). Although "Communicative competence" might seem an overworked phrase, it must be borne in mind that it introduced the concept of "language use" in a real situation, underlining the importance of *what* is said in a given context rather than only *how* it is said, where "how" means if correct or not. It should not be surprising, then, that "simulation and gaming theory relates clearly to communicative language acquisition, especially in the area of interaction and experience." (García-Carbonell et al., 2001).

1.2 - Instructional strategies

Research in the field of Instructional Design (Gagne & Briggs, 1974, Dick, Carey L., & Carey J.O., 2002) has produced in the years different instructional architectures and models. Starting from the well-known concept of "affordance" (Gibson, 1979), that is, the potential individuals perceive in a given environment or action, Instructional Design (ID) has ever since endeavored to identify the most suited instruction methods and strategies given the condition granted by the environment and the type of learning, as illustrated by Gagnè

(1965). By searching the most suited or preferable method, ID shapes its own workspace in the specific situation, rather than in the universal.

There exist different *models* that define "sequences of instructional interventions" (Ranieri, 2005, [my translation]), which the course design can refer to. Some stress collaboration, some other problem solving etc. For instance, the well-known *Collaborative Learning Environment* (Jonassen, 1999) is based on (collaborative) problem solving: participants are requested to solve, through discussion, an ill-defined problem (i.e. for which different solutions are possible). There also exist four architectures (Clarck, 1998, 2002) which define different modes of learning; for example, a guided discovery architecture is based on problem solving, situated learning, simulations etc.

Strategies are the building blocks of both models and architectures.

It is not always easy, nor useful, to draw rigid distinctions among the different strategies and some strategies have some common traits with others: simulation and role-playing, for example, share many points. These strategies afford great freedom and can be loosely adopted and modified within a given architecture. In the case presented in the following pages, at least three different strategies have been adopted, along with discussion (which constitutes the basis for collaborative work): simulation, role-playing and modeling.

Since these have been loosely adopted and interpreted in the course design, we will provide a brief description of each when illustrating the course.

1.3 - Network based language teaching and distance learning

Network-based language teaching (NBLT) – "language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000)- can either be considered as a subfield (or variant) of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or, more ambitiously, as the latest development in CALL. If compared with "traditional" (not network-based) CALL, in fact, NBLT shows a significant shift in the relationship between users and equipment; if in the former learners confronted – individually - with PCs and software, in NBLT they confront with other learners and/or human beings in general (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, Chapelle, 2001). It is not surprising, then, that technical development (the WWW) has somehow reshaped the ratio among the system actors (technology and learners) and reduced, *de facto*, the importance technology plays in CALL: ambitious projects of sophisticated intelligent systems seem to have lost their appeal to researchers, and CALL software designers are mostly concerned with effective communication among participants and information sharing tools (Gruba, 2004).

Nor is it surprising that this development in CALL has occurred along with the so-called "social turn" in language learning theories (Block, 2003; Gruba, 2004), originating from research studies within sociolinguistics (Hallyday and Hymes): Firth and Wagner (1997) sparked debate when they proposed a view to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) broader than the predominant Input/Output technical and computational one. Although the debate has continued for some years, social theories of SLA have become a major field of inquiry within specialized literature, reaching the CALL field (Chapelle, 1997 and Salaberry, 1999). As a result, "language instruction was viewed not just in terms of providing comprehensible input, but rather as helping students enter into the kinds of authentic social discourse situations and discourse communities that they would later encounter outside the classroom. Some saw this to be achieved through various types of task-based learning, in which students engaged in authentic tasks and projects" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

This shift in SLA theory and practice resulted in a deep change as regards the approach to technology of which the so-called "computer-as-toolkit model" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, Gruba, 2004) is significant: on one hand

equipment is no longer the sole partner of learners, but rather a toolkit assisting them into their work; on the other, software become communication tools.

As regards LSP, "English for Academic Purposes, for example, there has been a shift in emphasis from expressive writing toward helping students to integrate themselves into academic discourse communities through discussion and analysis of the nature of academic writing" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

1.4 - Issues in e-learning

This social and network turn of CALL, however, introduced new issues in the field, namely those related to distance learning. This practice and research field has greatly developed since the time Warschauer and Kern illustrated the potential of networks in SLA. To be honest, the path has neither been easy nor effortless and critical voices have arisen to point at the weaknesses of e-learning. Many (Romiszowski, 2004 collected over 100 articles on the "failure of e-learning"), in fact, have denounced the failure not of the medium itself , but of the way it is used, e.g. Bunis: *"software providers, who gave technology-obsessed course developers free rein to create glitzy, highly interactive, very expensive multimedia courseware that too often dazzled the eye without ever informing the mind. On the opposite end of the courseware spectrum, we find a plethora of brain-numbing online page-turners that are little more than PowerPoint presentations slapped up on the Web. They may have been cheap and easy for the vendors to produce in mass-market, but they cost the buyer far more than they were worth in employee time wasted using them."* (Bunis, 2003) This can be roughly summarized in some points (after Woodhill, 2004), of which four seem particularly urgent:
1. "Focus on new technology, not on instructional design"
2. Lack of understanding of learning and teaching
3. Boredom

4. Lack of understanding of the unique teaching advantages of electronic media
The idea of providing distance courses has led to enthusiasm towards technology and development, which, deprived of the necessary support by research in education, produced highly sophisticated software often too difficult and ineffective as regards real instruction.
Many solutions have been proposed to these problems, some quite "revolutionary" have proposed to abandon Virtual Learning Environments in favour of so-called Web 2.0 applications; although the works seems to be still under way, it is now a common place among designers and researchers, that a more "social" approach can be beneficial and lead to successful experiences (Downes, 2005). As we have seen in the field of Language Learning, in fact, NBLT focuses less on technology and more on interaction among participants. Interaction, together with effective Instructional Design and knowledge of the affordances offered by the medium, can highly improve the level of distance courses.

1.5 - Simulation and online LSP

In the light of these reflections, it is now possible to link among them these three issues, LSP, strategies and NBLT (together with development in SLA research). In the course, which is the object of this analysis, linguistic instruction has been provided through different tenets exposed in the literature and summarized in the previous pages: it is important, however, to notice that the elements have not been taken "as is", but rather adapted and reshaped both on the basis of educational and organizational/economic issues. For example, simulation can be more sophisticated than what accomplished, but, in this case, a plain textual simulation could fit.

2 - SIMULATION IN A LSP COURSE

In this second section, we present in detail the case study, its main features and the impact that

the simulation and role-play activities had on the learners.

2.1 - Course overview

The English language classes reported in these pages were part of a post graduate course for professionals in the Culture Industry, in particular professionals to be employed in Cultural Institutes. Although the course was almost completely held in classroom, the English language classes were held online, using the "Moodle" Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). They were run between October and November 2007, and were attended by 26 learners, most of which with a humanistic background.

The instruction aimed at covering, within the short span of time allowed for the classes, at least the most salient linguistic issues in the learners' professional field. This was not limited to the language of culture, but included also the language of formal communication among institutions: this was to be achieved through work on document types supposedly common in the field.

Need analysis and language description are fundamental issues in LSP (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004) and are therefore the subject of debate among specialists and the object of a rich literature; the first is an attempt to define *what* language do learners need to face their professional life, while the second focuses on *how* they will use the language in their work.

A time span of one week corresponded to a different document type. The document type was introduced to the learners, who, in their turn, should collaboratively produce a similar one. This work was not the subject of any evaluation during the course, but rather of a general assessment of the quality of each work (observations on weaknesses were issued after each work had been examined, along with the discussion carried on to produce it).

Learners were requested to work in groups and used for group communication a forum within the VLE in which only the English language

was allowed. They were also requested to limit as much as possible the use of attachments, in order to use the forum as a place for discussion rather than as a documents repository. In addition, there was a general help forum were they could communicate with the teacher as regards every other aspect of the course: organization, help for language matters, questions etc.

Before the first activity, the learners' general linguistic level was assessed via a simple test on randomly chosen linguistic features; in it, various issues were tested through a simple quiz: the results showed an average good level.

On the whole, the test was more important in introducing learners to use *fora*as a communication medium, where they could ask for explanations and discuss their results, than as regards a true evaluation of their language ability. After the completion of the test, were provided with a list of online resources (dictionaries, grammars, exercises) they could refer to also for their their future work.

This kind of test, however, could not detect what was the most critical point in the learners' competence: a not fully developed lexical ability, resulting, for instance, in using calques from their mother tongue, i.e., Italian: e.g. "and in the end *two words* about our governance" translating word by word an Italian phrase meaning "a few words" or "a word". To deal with this weakness, a series of data-driven learning activities, which we shall not further examine here, were carried on through the support of online concordancing software (Torsani, 2009).

2.2 - The simulation and the activities

As said before, the strategies illustrated in the literature were not taken "as is", but rather mixed and adapted to the needs of the learners and to the limits imposed by the environment.

In *modeling,* learners observe and repeat a model operation or example. They are not granted much freedom, but receive a practical instruction on how to do something. In this course learners were provided with some

sample documents they were to follow in order to prepare a seemingly real one.

Simulation can be highly sophisticated, that is, it can be supported by specialized software and hardware, or simply set up as a game. Its main feature is that it can reproduce situations and events of the real world, where learners act as if they were acting for real. In this course, no special equipment was used, but rather an imaginary setting was chosen in order to define a virtual and seemingly real workspace.

In a *role-playing* activity, learners, individually or in groups (as in the case presented), act as if they had particular characteristics, beliefs or roles. While in simulations learners are expected to carry out pre-determined actions, in role-playing they are allowed much more freedom to decide to decide their actions, yet respecting some constraints regarding their point of view or roles. In this course, learners were requested to act as if thir group was that the institution they played, but no other constraint was imposed on them.

The learners were divided into five groups of approximately five persons each. Every group pretended to be an institution or organization active in the culture industry: the British Museum, the Italian Culture Institute in London, a newspaper specialized in cultural events, an Italian museum and an Italian Research group.

A generic setting was defined, in which an important cultural event, a show on Italian Painting, was to take place in the near future at the British Museum.

As said before, every week a new document type was introduced. Learners had to cooperatively work a document produced by the organization/institution their group played.

1.   *Self-presentation*. Each group had to produce a document presenting the activities of the institution, illustrating its core business and its internal structure.

2.   *Formal/commercial letter*. Each group had to write a formal letter to another one to ask for information; e.g. the newspaper had to write to the British Museum to obtain information about the upcoming event.

3.   *Event description*. Each group had to describe the event from its own point of view; e.g. the Research group had to write a paper on the Painting Show.

4.   *Annual report*. Each group had to prepare an annual report of the institution activities.

Although learners were provided different reference models for each document type (e.g., a corpus of commercial letters, a corpus of annual reports) and had to simulate the production of a document type within a given setting, they were allowed great freedom of choice: it was the group that eventually decided the contents. For example:

"(…) after reading the proposal we've decided to create an "ideal" research group that works with cultural heritage made by wood. we have created a simple page to descript our aims and activites. tonight i will share our work with all you in the forum."

This freedom stimulated the learners' creativity: in fact, in many cases the documents layout was highly sophisticated, although there was no hint or request as regarded layout. The biggest part of the work, however, was done on the forum.

2.3   - Follow-up

Due to the short time span of this course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw any conclusion about linguistic improvements this instruction had and could have had on learners. What can, however, be objectively stated is that many of the events, elements and facts illustrated in the literature as beneficial took actually place.

This does not mean that the effectiveness of the instruction can be inferred from an indirect proof only: it is not possible to conclude that the instruction would have surely been effective in the long run because all those events that trigger language acquisition/learning have taken place. A number of unpredicted variables forbid this and, in the end, course effectiveness largely depends on the quality of the linguistic instruction and much more data should be

available before observing any improvement in the learners' linguistic competency.

But if we limit our analysis to those data that reveal exchanges among learners, we observe that many learners actively participated and that those phenomena such as negotiation, peer learning and interaction took place. We can quote a few examples of what happened in the forums:

"ah, just to be precise...I read again the text and I noticed I wrote 2 words I don't like..... :P in stead of "different cultural associations in Genoa" I'd write "several cultural..." and in stead of "giving the possibility" "giving the opportunity"."

"When I've read the text i've found some "oversights" and i've corrected them. I've changed a verb, as the teacher suggested during the correction of the first text."

Discussions of this kind have been extensively recognized in the literature as effective for language learning (Lamy & Hampel, 2007); hence their importance will not be further discussed here.

In this view, therefore, it is necessary to create the conditions favouring the developmet of such negotiations, that is, give rise to events that trigger learning. In the last decade, a number of studies have focused on what is generally known as *willingness to communicate*, "a situation-specific variable representing an intention to communicate at a specific time to a specific person" (MacIntire, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, 1998, in Chapelle, 2001). This willingness is relevant to at least two of the criteria for CALL activity evaluation proposed by Chapelle (2001), namely, *meaning focus* and *authenticity*. In both criteria learners need to actively use the language to say what they want or feel it is important to say and do not use the language passively as in form focused tasks. This leads them to try to use the language providing the situation for critical episodes such as negotiation, errors and metacognition.

So, when one learner wanted to describe the organization he worked for, he needed to write "the main office of the *journal* is in London", provoking a debate about the difference among *newspaper, magazine* and *journal*. This would not have been possible in a form-focused activity.

Inference from the collected data can help infer how the course structure has worked in this sense. Apart from the explicit appreciation of the course expressed by many, the collected data provide an interesting insight on the learners' behaviour that seems to confirm that a) the majority of the learners did not lose their interest and continued working during the course, b) learners actively participated in the activities and, as a consequence, c) the events shown in the literature actually took place.

There is also some evidence suggesting that the learners improved their lexical competence (or attention to lexis); a deeper and more focused analysis would be necessary, however, to confirm this aspect.

A brief summary of the learners' contribution to their group work reveals that their active participation created the conditions for those beneficial events. Again, although the number of students involved and the course duration are too limited to provide a strong argument, they confirm that the learners did not lose interest over the course and, in fact, built knowledge by discussing with each other. In the figure below, the first column (extensions) refers to how many parts each participant added to the latest version of the text, the second (corrections) refers to relevant changes and (explicit or implicit) corrections, while the third one (changes) refers to minor changes and (explicitly or implicitly stated) preferred forms.

	Extensions to the text	Corrections to the text	Changes to the text
Act. 1	18	14	4
Act. 2	20	10	5
Act. 3	23	13	5

3   CONCLUSIONS

Role-playing directly descends from psychodrama. The references pointed at in the paper's title, as a matter of fact, aims at drawing a parallel between theatrical conventions and instructional needs in (online) SLA.

A first reflection goes to the concept of *mimesis*, which, at least in theatre theory, refers to the credibility of a scene: the three unities of place, time and action served in classical theatre as a means for making the scene credible and, therefore, for encouraing the listeners to participate in the action. In the field of linguistic instruction, -we have seen - simulation and role-playing have an important job in making the linguistic exchanges credible and, therefore, stimulating the learners' active participation in them. For it is known that, if *willingness to communicate* is fostered in learners, events that trigger language learning are more likely to happen. In the case of LSP, imitation of reality is even more important, since dealing with the language learners will need in their professional life helps not only to foster their willingness to communicate, but more practically makes them confront with seemingly real texts within a seemingly real context or setting.

Moreover, the use and importance of language in drama is far beyond any tangent reflection and we should better avoid any perilous analogy between the language of modern drama and Language Learning. However, many scholars have noticed the instrumental use of language, especially in Elizabethan drama: words were used to describe natural events and or places, which would have been impossible with the limited scene devices in use at the time. Audacious as it may seem, there is an interesting resemblance between this instrumental use of language and the creativity learners showed when describing their institutions. It was through language that they built and described their workplaces, and, as in the example shown above, it was this creative use of language that often provided arguments for discussion.

As it is agreed in most studies, then, form-focused activities do not offer the conditions for the development of such potential; it was through meaning-focused ones, in which real language is used in a seemingly real world, that is, through the restoration of theatrical *mimesis*, that such potential could be exploited.

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