

Bridging the Gap between Language Teaching and Professional Training

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The paper with a focus on an interdisciplinary strategy of teaching and learning describes an experimental project that has been recently launched at Kazakh-British Technical University (Almati). The paper discusses this innovative teaching strategy for undergraduate sustained simulation EPP-Engineering course.

Over the past decades a variety of non-traditional humanistic teaching methods such as Simulation, Total Physical Response, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Natural Approach, Community Language Learning, etc. has been introduced in teaching systems throughout the world. This article covers some of the main issues of simulation in language teaching by answering a series of questions connected with professional training. It examines what a language-learning simulation is, looks at some of the problems, and suggests possible ways of how to strengthen the links with professional orientation. As a teacher of English and Japanese I rely on my international experience of language training and teaching (Japan, Great Britain, Denmark, Ukraine, Kazakhstan).

Simulation is considered by many scholars to be a complex and particularly effective method of instruction. Today it is widely known that psychological research provided the persuading data that knowledge is best acquired through direct perception and activity. Scholars are unanimous that simulation as a language teaching method provides a way of creating a communicative environment where students actively interact. They stress that it creates the situation when "representivity fades" (Crookall and Oxford, 15); they also state that it is the world *outside* the simulation that becomes imaginary (Black; Jones 1995). Among the strong points of simulation they list the fulfillment of students' need for realism – a desire to relate to life "out there" beyond the classroom (McArthur, 101), the increase in student's and teacher's motivation (Jones 1982); the change in the teacher-student relationship that leads to "declassrooming" the classroom; the learner's advantage to confront and identify with target culture (Crookall and Oxford); the reduction of fear and anxiety levels, which are psychologically essential to language development (Dulay, Burt and Karashen), and what is very important to my mind and what is often overlooked – is the use of simulations as a means of testing language as well as professional skills *in action*.

The analysis of the books published on the problems of innovative teaching methods persuades that the change in the attitude to the simulation as an educational principle is a vivid

illustration of its growing significance. Being often identified with role play, it gradually acquires in the eyes of scholars an independence and specificity outside traditional set of teaching methods.

It is common knowledge that simulation has been used as a technique in education for a long time but it has only recently been applied to language teaching. According to K.Jones, simulations are gaining increasing popularity because they are “ideally suited to language practice”. In his book “Simulations in Language Teaching”(1982), K.Jones provides a comprehensive explanation of this phenomenon and gives an example of a simulation activity that lasts hours. For my article his book has been selected as the main literature with which I enter into a controversy by showing that simulation may vary and even cross the border of the real, whereas K.Jones insists that simulation is the most successful activity in case it has no contact with the real world. He defines simulation as a “reality of function” in a simulated and structured environment (*Simulations in Language Teaching*, 5), and singles out three main characteristics of simulation that will be polemically considered throughout my paper:

1. *A reality of function*, which means the participants in a simulation must step inside the role, they have accepted and act accordingly.
2. *A simulated environment* where there is no contact with the real world.
3. *A structured environment* where the participants have all the facts and information provided for them.

This brings me to a braided theme of my paper. I venture to step into a very disputable and ill-defined field, dealing with the advantages of simulation teaching method over the more accepted role play, which is often considered as its direct counterpart. Besides, I argue against “lumping” together simulation and role play. The latter generally focuses on prescriptive themes and specific vocabulary and is preliminarily “imagined” and could only be played. Conversely, the method of simulation described in my paper strives to ruin this barrier of artificiality, of prescribed profiles, emphasizing in simulation method the application both of language skills and fundamental knowledge in the field of chosen profession. From here I start my polemics with K.Jones, who considers that in simulation the participants step *inside* the roles.

In fact, simulations share a lot in common with other communicative teaching methods (case studies, role play): all are interactive learning events. However in role plays the learners take on characters that are not their own, while participants in a simulation behave as themselves, solving *real but not imaginary situations*. They apply their own personal and professional background as well as language experiences to any situation in the process of simulation activity. In addition, from language point of view, role plays or single-case studies are often set up to practice *particular* language in a fixed context and are relatively simple and short. Simulation

classes, on the other hand, provide *real* problems and get the participants more personally involved. Students use their own judgments and linguistic resources while engaging in a variety of activities such as resourcing, discussing, and analyzing. While the pattern of simulation may vary greatly, all simulations require participants to assess and respond to a specified task.

Thus, I suggest differentiating between simulation as complex and authentic and role-playing game as simple, brief and what is very important to underline, as an assigned and predictable activity. Though the former cannot but include the elements of role play (Ladousse), it could hardly be reduced to it as its full equivalent.

My second point is that it is necessary to differentiate between the discrete and sustained simulations. The paper describes the stages and strategies of a *sustained simulation modeling* in EPP-Engineering class as different from a *discrete simulation method*. It is worth mentioning that the phenomenon of extended simulation has already been discussed by the scholars in a format “*Let's Do Business*”. The idea was to design simulation class on Business English as one semester block that should include all stages as they exist in real life: from the rise of a travel agency, for example, with all the stages of recruiting and interviewing the staff, designing the commercials, negotiating the contract, doing paper work, as well as the mundane day-to-day responsibilities of running the office, solving the problems of staff turnover, starting contract negotiations, etc. – to signing the contract and analyzing the outcome of the activity. In such simulations participants assume individual roles in a hypothetical social group and experience the complexity of imaginary work. What is important to stress here is that they *do* play roles.

In my paper I would try to suggest another possible vision of this sustained simulation teaching method, which is directly connected with the training in the main engineering specialty and which provides opportunities of bridging the gap between language education and professional training. The format of my sustained simulation class is “*Designing KBTU as a Kazakh Technology Park*”. I have developed the following scenario for my class that lasts one semester. What I stress as new is its direct connection with the life situation at KBTU. Currently KBTU is initiating a challenging innovative project on technopark. This fresh and promising idea is being widely discussed at KBTU now. Besides, the students know that their teacher is a member of KBTU technopark project board and also works collaboratively on it. In this case the students realize that what they are doing during this period at EPP classes is not just a game, but also a serious life-demanding project. They have a real and not an imaginary opportunity to contribute their professional ideas to how to implement this project. Besides, their efforts to formulate and to write a tentative rationale in English cross the hour limit of a lesson. Their activity becomes all day work – in fact a life (not only a class) sustained activity, and turns out to be more than a mere simulation. The students are inside the integrated communication

environment and their activities have immediate relevance. Besides, they are “plugged” in the midst of the University life and feel themselves an important part of the intellectual community. This emotionally-charged nature of simulation, its competitive atmosphere, the desire to contribute valuable ideas to the project development, undoubtedly, intensify the process of mastering not only the English language of their specialty, but also professional skills.

I classify this type of “plugged in life” simulation as a multi-agenda simulation that includes both *decision-making simulation*, as well as *process simulation*. Decision-making simulation deals with the elaboration of strategy to achieve specific goals. In the process of simulation the emphasis is laid on the collaborative efforts connected with the work on the technopark project. The generalized scenario that I have designed for discussion and critical evaluation includes the working on the analysis of the following issues relevant to their professional training:

- thechnopark as a structural subdivision of University: pros and cons;
- incubator as a model to promote new initiatives of business production and the primary objectives it should address;
- know-how in the fields of their specialty (it could be, for example, incubator based developer of gas sending technology or the like);
- ways of combining scientific know-how with business enterprises;
- how to encourage and facilitate the knowledge transfer into commercial world, and promote industrial linkage;
- how to bring the results of fundamental research into practice;
- synergy effect of technologically innovative research;
- cost effectiveness of the project launched by the University;
- attraction of funding investments;
- the future of start-up companies incubated in the University incubator;
- barriers for innovations;
- success factor;
- local economic impact;
- expected outcome and results;
- designing the websites for technopark project;
- the analysis of the complex relationship among various factors.

Why then do I still label this “real life” activity as simulation? The main reason for this is its *mediated nature*. The professional problem becomes the subject of language course with emphasis on simulating *language situations* as well. And though neither their roles, nor their

goals are fictitious, the students cannot but feel this distance from “the real”, having been distanced by the “language efforts”, by struggling to find words to express themselves, thus going on mastering English.

The departure from the traditional tutorials to this simulation classes significantly transforms the learning and teaching process in a number of ways. First of all, the students are in active but not in receptive roles. Secondly, the emphasis is both on individual and collaborative activity. Thirdly, it provides the flexibility of the delivery of language material and activates what has already been learned. The ultimate success of this simulation depends on the efficacy of debriefing session where students can openly discuss current technical mini-problems, behaviors, outcomes, general language difficulties, and the contextual appropriateness of their language discourse.

It goes without saying that simulation should be built on sound pedagogical foundation. It is not a chaotic “say what you think” trick. It empowers innovative teachers to experiment with, what I call *creative professional simulations* that enable students to practice the skills demanded by their professional fields. From this point of view the simulation is demanding not only on the students, but also on the teacher. Considerable effort is required in setting up a sustained simulation scenario, ensuring that students are briefed on their professional search. Students are provided with the handouts that contain the words and expressions, which have to be used on this subject. This simulation class is focused on the development of writing skills as well. The students are expected to communicate in a written form, while writing technopark project, business plans, sending emails, preparing memos, etc.

Another important issue is how to assess this activity. There is no doubt that the use of simulations is an important means of testing the language skill *in action* and students can be assessed in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of the activity. Assessment could be based on how students have performed individual tasks and on their participation and contribution to the group effort. If the participants keep diaries or memos (which is very useful for this purposes) every student can be allocated marks for this procedure. In my simulation class the students are assessed as well on the basis of their techno plan, which they are working on during one semester.

One might question the possibility of carrying out such sustained simulations, while dealing simultaneously with the demands of classroom requirements. Whatever the obstacles, I have already observed that once the students have tasted the benefits of simulation, their enthusiasm to learn considerably improves. I am confirmed that traditional methods do little to prepare the students for the realities and demands of our times. Today a pedagogically necessary stage is to transfer formal classroom learning to the real world. Simulations that bridge the gap

between language instruction and professional training deserve a central place in our repertoire of teaching methods and are destined to become the cornerstone of Global education in the 21st century.

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