Simulation-Games in Foreign Language Classrooms [1]

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In this article, I present a rationale, practical suggestions, and applicable examples for simulation-games in classes for beginning and advanced foreign language learners at high school and college levels.

Simulation techniques are not new in foreign language instruction. The term simulation, however, is better known in areas such as business, psychology, professional and intercultural training than in the field of language teaching. *Role play*, *game*, *scenario*, and *mini-drama* are related terms and concepts which are well known by language teachers. These terms represent activities that can be subsumed under simulation-gaming or that include elements of simulation-games. Although some authors stress the difference between simulation and the other concepts above (e.g., Jones 1982), I will focus here on their shared potential to relate classroom practice to real-life, to motivate and animate students, and to foster students' reflection about their own actions.

The technique of simulation-gaming includes two slightly different concepts: simulation and gaming. "Simulations are generally held to be a structured set of circumstances that mirror real life and in which participants act as instructed."(Doughill 1987: 20). The main features of a simulation are (1) reality relatedness, (2) structure, and (3) participants' acting according to the set-up structure. Games also involve roles to be played or acted out by the participants according to the structure or rules of the game. Gaming participants attempt to achieve certain goals or objectives, and they are rewarded or punished for their actions. However, not all games are simulations (they do not necessarily mirror real life situations); and not all simulations are games with winners and losers (e.g., wind tunnel or emergency simulations). Simulations in foreign language classes, however, will usually involve game attributes in simulated (real-life) situations.

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Simulation-Games: Rationale, Objectives, and Goals

Simulation-gaming can be found an appealing technique in foreign language teaching, not least because of Mexicans' (or Latinos') predilection for play, drama, and action. Some theory and research in second/foreign language acquisition (SLA) seem to support the application of simulation-gaming to language teaching (Crookall and Oxford 1990). Several proposed global driving forces of SLA may be relevant to the objectives and attributes of successful simulation-games. DiPietro (1976: 6,7), reflecting on the sources of linguistic creativity, draws our attention towards human beings' ability to form, and to accept, **metaphors** as realities. Human beings' metaphoric or "poetic force", he claims, is essential for human creativity and the "key innate" property of language and its use. Along these lines, Seliger (1983) points to **curiosity**, as a general human drive towards discovering the "unknown" or "strange" and as the motivating force for SLA. He also suggests **creativity** to be a human universal which he describes as the ability to bring connections and pattern into what appears to be chaos. Larsen-Freeman (1997) goes one step further in comparing SLA with other complex, non-linear systems studied by chaos/complexity science. According to her, the development of a non-linear system (and possibly much of language learning) emerges out of the **interaction** of parts of a whole, as a **creative, self-organizing growth** at the border between **chaos** and **order**. Much of learning involves the **reduction of uncertainty**. Persistent turbulence and periodical chaos, however, are characteristic for the development of non-linear systems.

Much of SLA theory has focused on the importance of **communication** for language development (e.g., Schulz, 1991). Saville-Troike (1985: 265) stresses the "socially and contextually embedded nature of language", pointing to (child) language learners' engagement in **role relationships** within a communicative event and its significance for learning. Dougill (1987), DiPietro (1987), and others acknowledge that social/cultural and personal roles are similarly important to adult language learning. Communication is, of course, a major goal and component of simulation-games (Crookall and Oxford 1990; Jones 1982). The speech generated by students participating in a simulation is likely to be **comprehensible input** which roughly corresponds to and often slightly exceeds the participants' proficiency level (Scarcella and Crookall 1990). Krashen (1982) and others have argued that comprehensible input is the major factor in acquiring a foreign

language. In addition to receiving comprehensible input, student-actors in simulation-games are required to respond, interact, and to produce **comprehensible output**. Swain (1985) suggested that receiving comprehensible input is insufficient for the development of productive skills in learners and that explicit speaking practice and learners' reflection about their language output is needed. Most simulation-games require that the participants produce language which corresponds to the theoretical claims about the importance of foreign language learners' output.

Students' **attitudes and motivation** (see e.g., Gardner and Lalonde 1990) and **animation** by and **attention** to the task are prerequisites for their active participation in communicative tasks and functions. Consequently, simulation games should relate, if possible, to learners' interests, goals or other aspects that are relevant in their lives. A classroom **atmosphere of trust and mutual respect** will reduce some students' inhibition to speak and facilitate active participation. Simulation-games can help to lower learners' anxiety levels (see Horwitz and Young 1990) because learners take over a role, which like a mask, permits them to be someone different and speak without necessarily uncovering their own opinions or feelings (Magariño González 1996, Way 1980). Furthermore, a simulation should allow for students' **self-expression**. Imitation by itself does not allow for much self-expression and creativity. Instead, students' need to have the freedom to invent novel things, to analyze situations or problems, and to make decisions in order to resolve problems. Finally, if our students **evaluate** and **reflect** on their and their peers' acting during or after a simulation-game, and if they compare the simulation with real-life contexts, our main objective is reached: We create an environment that is similar to real-life situations which requires human interaction and communication and in which participants learn language by using it and by reflecting on it.

Attributes of Successful Simulation-Games

Simulation-games are not in themselves necessarily motivating and animating. The question to be asked is: Why are certain simulation-games more successful than others and what are the necessary ingredients of a good simulation? Table 1 summarizes the features which I consider important for a successful simulation-game.

TABLE 1: OBJECTIVES AND ATTRIBUTES OF AN EFFICIENT SIMULATION

What a simulation should include	*What a simulation should produce:*
Reality-Relatedness	Motivation
Structure	Animation, Involvement
Problematicity	Interaction
Conflict/Tension	Cooperation/Competition
Emotionality	Creativity
Unpredictability/Uncertainty	Self-Expression
Open-Endedness	Trust/Respect
	(Self-) Reflection/Evaluation

Reality-relatedness is a necessary part of a simulation. This does not mean that only real (or realistic) events or situations can be simulated. On the contrary, unusual, odd, or rare events are often more interesting and animating than routine events of every-day life. What counts is the possibility that the situation could be real; that participants accept this reality, including the functions they have to fulfill and the responsibilities they have to assume (often for a group, team or partner). In a courtroom simulation, for example, the student playing the prosecutor has to accept his/her role and step inside this function mentally and behaviorally. The "prosecutor" has to believe (or act as if s/he believes) that the accused is guilty and must do everything possible (within the appropriate structure and rules) to persuade the jury of the accused's guilt.

A simulation has to be well-structured; and this **structure** should be built around a **problem**. Many of the "usual" role plays miss this important component. Going to a store and buying clothes is not a challenging enough problem for a good simulation. Example (1), however, may be the basis of a more animating and challenging simulation:

> Example (1): "The robbed bather"
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> You are a bather, who was robbed of all your clothes and money at a beach. Try to convince two of the few people on the beach to help you obtain some clothes. The two people are difficult to convince. They suspect that you are a beggar trying to get some "easy" money.

Unlike a regular customer in a store, the victimized bather is faced with an unusual and difficult problem. Most of the time, it will be the teacher's task to provide challenging simulation scripts, i.e., descriptions of

the problem and situation in a briefing session or through specific and clearly written instructions. Students who are already familiar with simulation-gaming, however, may develop or create their own simulation scripts or modify the teacher's script.

Conflict/tension which are often elicited in competitive tasks, such as games, are other desirable attributes of a simulation-game (Margariño González 1996: 168). The "Balloon" simulation script illustrated in example (2) is likely to create conflict and tension among the participants:

Example (2): "The balloon"

You are with a group of people flying in a balloon over the ocean (the last human beings after a global catastrophe, as in the film "Water World"). Your balloon is sinking because of a gas leak. Two group members will have to jump out of the balloon and die. Only through their sacrifice will the others (the rest of humankind) survive. Among the balloon passengers are Brian, a physician, 54 years old; Ralph, U.S. president, 60 years old; Virginia, a pregnant 26-year old shop assistant; Laura, a 10-year old student; Albert, 39 years old, nuclear physicist; Ruth, a 36-year old biologist etc. Each of you has to argue why your survival is more important for humankind than the life of the others. A jury (the other observing students) will then decide who may survive and who has to die.

Note that the teacher again has to prepare detailed instructions, and explain the situation, the problem and the roles and characteristics of the participants. Participants' actions (their argumentation) will finally be rewarded (with life) or punished (with death) by the jury. The students who are part of the jury will only be able to make a responsible decision by actively listening to the participants, analyzing and evaluating their argumentation.

Experiencing problems, conflict or tension is frequently accompanied by emotional reactions, i.e., excitement, pleasure or anger. The people in the balloon do not want to "die"(and lose the deadly game), so they set out to fight for survival. **Emotionality** is a positive feature in a simulation because it helps participants accept their functions as reality. They may forget that they are students in a classroom with a teacher present and focus on communication in order to solve a problem or to make a decision.

Creating conflict or tension is not the only way to involve students emotionally. Using problems or events that are provocative with respect to students' moral or value systems is another excellent way to induce emotionality. The jury in the "Balloon" simulation described above will definitely

have to consider their value system for making a decision about "life and death". Example (3) represents a simulation script which is related to the topic of loving relationships, a theme that has much potential for participants' and observers' emotional involvement.

Example (3): "Secret lovers"

Juan and Carla are peers and friends. They are having a cup of coffee in the cafeteria after their English class. Juan has problems with his girlfriend, Lisa. Lisa is having an affair with someone else. He knows that she has been out several times with another man and thinks that she is going to end their relationship soon. Juan is very sad and depressed because he still loves Lisa. Carla is trying to help him. She likes him a lot, perhaps more than a friend does. Actually a good chance... (Ecke 1996)

College students will not have a problem accepting this situation as reality. These kinds of problems happen in real life, and dealing with them requires people to relate to certain values. Accepting the role of being "cheated-on" by a girlfriend and still loving her will invoke emotionality in the male student. The same is likely to happen in the female participant who has to accept secretly loving a friend who is just on the verge of losing his lover. The way in which the simulation is acted out by the two participants is also likely to induce emotionality in the other students who observe, evaluate, and, perhaps discuss the scene in a debriefing session, for the simulation may touch upon, maybe even violate, their own values.

Another important feature, inherent in both the examples of the balloon and the relationship simulation-games, is the **unpredictability** and **open-endedness** of the outcome. (Recall the importance of uncertainty reduction for learning proposed by chaos science!) The audience, as well as the participants, at least initially, should not know how the simulation unfolds, and what the outcome or solution to the problem may be (Karbowska 1984). The secret lover in the relationship-simulation may, in one scenario, sacrifice her own love by helping her friend to reunite with his unfaithful lover. In another simulation, however, she may attempt to lure the good old friend into a romantic dinner and help him to overcome his grief differently. In other words, although the simulation has to be structured enough by stating the situation, and by characterizing the participants' functions, its outcome has to remain open. Improvisation will often be a major element in a simulation-game (see e.g., Margariño González 1996). The attributes in table

(1) are, of course, interrelated: they affect and strengthen each other if they are all part of a simulation.

The Changing Role of the Teacher

Teachers who want to use simulation-games have to do intensive preparatory work that requires time and creativity. First, the teacher has to decide where in the course program simulation-games are appropriate. The **objectives** of the simulation need to be clear and they should be related to specific course objectives. The teacher has to **choose, design, or modify** simulation scripts and tailor these to the students (their interests, age, level of proficiency, culture etc.). The scripts should include the attributes of an effective simulation-game suggested above.

Once a simulation or a set of simulation scripts has been chosen as a classroom activity, the students need to be **briefed**, i.e., instructed. The problem and the participants' functions have to be outlined, and rules and time limits have to be set. Speed and time pressure often contribute to the success of a simulation because it can increase problematicity and conflict/tension. Written instructions for each student can save time and make instructions clearer than an oral explanation. During the actual student simulation, the teacher's presence is at best perceived as "low key". The participants of a simulation perform, interact, and communicate with each other. If there is a preparatory or practice session, students can consult the teacher if they have problems or questions. However, the teacher should only act as an **animator** and **adviser**, not as a decision maker (Cómitre Narváez and Valverde Zambrana 1996: 180). Participants need to take responsibility for themselves, and make decisions in order to solve the problems. In the actual simulation-game session, in which participants act, the teacher is provided with the "unique opportunity to **monitor, assess** and **appreciate** the participants, not just for their language abilities as students, but as whole people."(Jones 1982: 17). The teacher has time to evaluate students' performance with respect to language use, communication, and social skills. S/he can take note of strengths, weaknesses and of possible improvements needed by the students. In some cases, however, the teacher can also be an active participant in the simulation game. Especially in beginners' classes, the teacher may carry out a major function within simulation-games because of students' limited productive skills. Student-participants' actions in simulations for beginners may have to be limited to physical responses or limited verbal responses (see the examples below).

After the simulation-game, a **debriefing** session may be useful. Debriefing sessions can focus on the content of the simulation, e.g., discuss controversial actions or alternative outcomes, or they can focus on problems of language use or social/cultural interaction. Participants may be asked to reflect upon what they felt while acting and they may compare their simulations with associated real-life events.

Examples of Simulation-Games in the Curriculum

It is generally accepted that simulations can be applied in advanced and intermediate language classes. The sample simulation-games sketched out above ("Robbed bather", "Balloon", and "Secret lover") require a certain level of proficiency. In beginners' classes, however, simulations appear to be more difficult to apply. Therefore, three examples shall be presented to illustrate that simulations can also be used in beginning language learning.

The first example is the "Boat people" simulation-game, or simply called "Boats" by Vargas Vargas and Bustillos de Nuñez (1992). This simulation-game can be applied to practice numbers. Numbers are usually taught early in language programs. Once the first 12 or 20 numbers have been introduced, the boat people simulation can be used to practice the new structures. Note that the following instructions may have to be simplified and accompanied by pictures (a sinking ship, life boats etc.) if it is going to be presented in the target language.

Example (4): "Boat people"

We are all on a big ship which is just about to sink. Fortunately, there are life boats available. These, however, are of different sizes: some are for 4 people, others for 6, etc. The captain (the teacher or a selected student) will announce what kinds of boats are available at the moment. You will have five seconds only to get into a boat in order to survive (symbolize this by forming and closing a circle holding hands). The crucial point is that no more or less than the designated number of people can get into the boats, otherwise the boats will sink and people will drown and die a terrible death. Those of you who do not manage to form the correct circle in time will "die"(i.e., they will be excluded from the next call for boats).

With subsequent calls for boats in example (4), participants will be eliminated, so that only two final players (the winners) survive the catastrophe. A simulation in which beginning students can productively use numbers is the "Auction" simulation-game. Before I explain this simulation, I shall

briefly describe another simulation-game, the "Robbery", which can be combined with, i.e., directly precede the "Auction" simulation. Whereas in the "Boat people" and "Auction" simulations, language structures (numbers) are practiced and repeated after they had been introduced previously, the "Robbery" game illustrates that simulations can also serve to present new material and to let students induce new lexical (or grammatical) meaning through context.

Example (5): "The robbery"

"The Robbery" is a simulation-game in which the teacher is the primary actor, i.e., the robber. The simulation needs to be carried out at the very beginning of the class to ensure a certain surprise factor. No prior instruction is needed in this case. Students have internalized a "robbery" scheme from numerous mystery movies, news reports etc. They know how to "act"(as victims) in a robbery. More specific instructions will be given by the robber as part of the simulation. The robber enters the class (preferably disguised and with a toy revolver), and announces that this is a robbery, that his revolver is loaded and that this is not a joke. He instructs everybody to stand up, to remain calm and to keep their hands up. Then he demands money, and other valuable objects (watches, jewelry, jackets, bags...) which he collects in a bag. One of the victims assists him to collect the items. After sufficient valuable items have been collected, the robber escapes after instructing the victims to remain in the room for at least 15 minutes without calling the police. (Important note: Make sure that the revolver is clearly identifiable as a toy, perhaps by choosing a yellow or pink one. A too realistic simulation might become dangerous!)

The fact that the robber is demanding various "watches", "rings" etc. makes possible that the victims (poor learners!) repetitively associate the requested objects with the new to-be (or recently) learned word which is, in other words, good learning practice. Having an assistant collect valuable items is especially useful if possessive pronouns shall be introduced or practiced besides content words. ("I want *his* watch, *her* ring, *their* earrings!")

After having successfully escaped from the robbery and returned to class as a potentially rich man or woman, the teacher remains with the problem of redistributing the stolen items. The "Auction" simulation-game is a perfect means to resolve this problem:

Example (6): "The auction"

> The auction is opened and the audience is welcomed. One after another (stolen) item is announced for sale, described, praised for its quality, and an initial price is offered. The students, who have now turned into distinguished ladies and gentlemen, make their bids (offering money) until the to-be sold item is "gone".

In the auction simulation, the newly introduced vocabulary is being repeated, and numbers are productively used by the students interested in acquiring objects of desire. Note that the three simulations presented above include the major attributes which I suggested for efficient simulation: The situations are possible enough for the participants to accept them as real. There are serious problems to solve (surviving a ship wreckage, a robbery, and the need or desire to acquire a valued object), and there is conflict, unpredictability and open-endedness. It is unknown who will survive the catastrophe, what will happen during the course of the robbery, and who will win the objects offered in the auction.

The examples cited above suffice to illustrate that simulation-games can be applied in classes with advanced, intermediate and even beginning language learners. Most of the simulation-games so far presented are relatively short and limited to (a part of) one class period. At the end of this paper, I would like to illustrate that also more extensive long-term simulations are possible. One potentially extensive simulation has been mentioned briefly: the "Courtroom" simulation-game (e.g., Clark and McDonough 1982)

> Example (7) "The courtroom"
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> A crime thriller, a newspaper report of a spectacular crime or a short story can set the stage, i.e., introduce characters and background information about a crime. Students are assigned roles (accused, judge, counsel for the defense, counsel for the prosecution, witness, police officer, private detective, family member, jury). Rules (the court proceedings) are set by the judge, i.e., when the prosecution and defense present, etc. The judge opens the case, postpones sessions and leads the case until the end, i.e., the accused is declared guilty or not guilty by the jury, and (if applicable) a sentence is handed down.

A well-organized and structured court case simulation in an intermediate or advanced class can continue for days or weeks if the dynamics are right, i.e., if the prosecution and the defense groups are creative enough to

find, discuss, and present new evidence and counter evidence with respect to the guilt of the accused. Note also that an abstract problem, e.g., "El machismo: Un problema del hombre"(Vargas Vargas and Bustillos de Nuñez 1992: 2.40) can be the accused in a court case simulation.

Simulations can also go through the whole semester: The "Secret friend" simulation (Vargas Vargas and Bustillos de Nuñez 1992; Green and Green 1993) is an example for such a long-term project. Letters from a secret friend can serve as an excellent means to provide students with writing practice outside the classroom.

Example (8): "The secret friend"

At the late beginning of a course, every student has to pick a piece of paper with the name of a peer (preferably of the other sex). The person will then become the secret friend of the peer whose name s/he had picked. Throughout the course, the students are encouraged to write letters to the designated person without revealing their identity, only signing the letter with "your secret friend". A mailbox outside the classroom door which can only be emptied by the postman (the teacher who distributes the letters) helps to protect the writers' anonymity. At the end of the semester, course members have to guess the name of the anonymous writer, i.e., their secret friend.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to propose simulation-games as a complementary technique to develop communication skills in foreign language classrooms. I argued that simulation-games should mirror reality, be well-structured, involve a problem, and invoke conflict, tension, and emotionality in the participants. The outcome of the simulation should remain open and unpredictable. Simulation-games with these attributes will motivate and animate students to be involved in communication through interactive, creative action. Not every teacher will feel comfortable using simulation-games in the foreign language classroom. Certainly, there are alternative techniques which can be used to develop communication skills. However, if this paper has sensitized some readers to the potential of simulation techniques for language teaching, if it has awakened interest in trying out simulations, or designing and implementing their own simulation-games, its objective has been reached.

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