Chapter IX

A Bridge to the Workplace: Using an Internet-Based Simulation in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

In this chapter, we examine the ways in which the Internet was used to run a case study-based, decision-making simulation in an academic writing class of 26 Japanese students studying English at a computer science university. The students had to construct an online glossary aimed at building sufficient background knowledge related to the simulation and then, in teams, create online documents demonstrating an understanding of the simulation problem and offer potential solutions. Information was delivered to students via the Web, and all documents produced by students were posted to their homepages. Assessment and observation revealed that the objectives of the simulation were achieved and that students were quite motivated throughout the simulation because they were able to make connections between the simulation activities and their chosen career. It is hoped that this study will act as an impetus for additional online simulation experiments in academia, business, and government.
Introduction

Simulations have been used in a variety of settings dependent upon the goals of the organizers or sponsors. In business, company executives have found simulations to be a viable training tool for employees; in education, simulations have been found to be an interesting and motivating way to teach a variety of concepts and ideas. For many, the word simulation is associated with aerospace or business. In the aerospace realm, we think of astronauts training in a simulated space pod, so that decision-makers can see how they will perform when under stressful and perhaps even dangerous conditions. Business simulations are often used within business courses at the university level. A common backdrop in a business-oriented simulation is for students to run a mock company. Written communication in such simulations is often times a vital aspect of the simulation, and might include such items as business letters to customers, memos from bosses, and reports about the “bottom-line” (Jones, 1985; Gredler, 1994). In education, simulations have been used to expose cultural biases, develop teamwork, make difficult decisions affecting many people, reveal how various social systems function, and probably most importantly, they have become a tool whereby participants can reflect upon experiences gained from the simulated tasks that help them draw parallels to real-world activities that affect humans in everyday situations (Crookall et al., 1988).

Here we are concerned with the incorporation of simulations that take advantage of technology but are for the purposes of language learning. Recently tried simulations addressing both of these areas simultaneously provide some good examples how technology and simulations have been integrated for language learning purposes. The always-innovative Coleman (2002) used SIM-software that effectively taught the skill of providing directions. Students had to pilot a helicopter through a virtual environment by giving accurate directions in English. Additionally, Freiermuth (2002a) developed a simulation that was run using Internet chat as the forum of communication. It was found that English language learning students were more effective communicating and solving problems in English online than they were in face-to-face environments. Also, recently a number of commercially designed software titles have been developed that incorporate the use of simulations (whether they are called by this name or not), coupled with language learning activities (see Li & Topelewski, 2002).

In our case, we wanted to design a simulation that incorporated the use of the Internet while maintaining an EST (English for science and technology) focus. From the outset, our goal was to design activities that helped foster decision-making processes that mimic processes that students might encounter in a professional setting (Freiermuth, 2002b). This concept runs parallel to one of the cornerstone ideals of language learning in an EST setting—the classroom should
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