

ENHANCING ULIS 4TH YEAR STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH USING JOB SEARCH SIMULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English speaking skills has always been challenging for language teachers, especially non-native teachers of English. It is even harder when teachers teach more advanced students. This does not only come from the more difficult syllabus requirements for both teachers and students when dealing with more difficult speaking activities but also from the students' need for a more practical and engaging practice that will be of great use for them when they enter the workforce. Over the years, research on using simulations has been carried out to experience and reflect on the effectiveness of exploiting simulations for class activities (Harmer, 1999; Sam, 1990; and Hyland (2009)). This study, carried out at University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam during the last semester when students both study a course named Advanced Spoken Language Use and have an internship. The study aims to (a) introduce a model of teaching speaking skills through job search related simulations and (b) explore both teachers' and students' feedback on the effectiveness of this model. A group of 50 students were asked to give feedback on the model that they have experienced. Interviews with six other teachers were also exploited in order to get a deeper understanding. The findings have revealed that both teachers and students enjoys using simulations in classrooms. Their speaking skills and performance have also improved significantly. Besides, these final year students have still benefited much through the preparation process as well as the final performance sessions because they really find these activities practical and useful for them in their job search for both part-time jobs during their years at university and after their graduation.

Key words: *tasked-based learning, simulation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, how to teach English speaking skills effectively has been widely discussed. As more and more people become to realize the importance of being able to communicate effectively in English, activities are designed to help students “to speak fluently, to listen carefully, and to do with and to use the language effectively in their oral communication” (Chouldhary, 2013). Numerous techniques and activities have been introduced to make the classroom activities more effective and more communicative or ‘real-life’, such as dramas, discussions, problem-solving, role-plays and simulations. All of these activities can be used in speaking classes, but the proportion may vary, depending on the levels of students and the course objectives as well.

As the subjects of this study were the senior students who were about to graduate from ULIS in order to start their own career, the author decided to implement simulation technique in their speaking classes so that these students could use English language in the most meaningful way. The simulation applied to these students was a job search one in which students had chance to experience all aspects of a job search process, both as interviewees and interviewers for the two different rounds.

Using the job search simulation, the author expected these students to implement all the process of a job search. Students were asked to work in groups of four for the two different rounds, taking turns to be either the interviewers or interviewees. As interviewers, the students had to provide the job advertisement, job descriptions and requirements and skills; prepare a list of interview questions and the purpose set for each of these interview questions, and write the report on completion of the interview. As interviewees, the students need to go through the application process, such as writing their own CVs and covering letters, finding information about the company so that they can get ready to answer questions at the interview.

To be more specific, this study aimed to:

- (a) introduce a model of teaching speaking skills through job search related simulations
AND
- (b) explore both teachers' and students' feedback on the effectiveness of this model of simulation

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON RELATED THEORIES

2.1. The Definitions Of 'Simulation'

In language teaching, various activities have been used to promote speaking, such as brainstorming, discussions, storytelling, information gap, roleplays, simulations and so on. They are all very effective in helping to create a communicative atmosphere in the language classrooms. Simulations can be a typical activity that helps to foster students' speaking ability. According to Sam (1990) (as cited in Chouldhary, 2013), simulations were originally used as a learning technique in business and military training rather than in English language teaching. And initially simulations were just defined as a 'structured set of circumstances that mirror real life and participants act instructed'. In this way, a lot of similarities can be seen when comparing role-plays and simulations. But in simulations, behavior is not controlled, so the participants bring their own skills, experience and knowledge. This certainly helps to create a real life-like situation which is one of the fundamental conditions for effective and efficient language learning. Thus, as Hyland (2009) has stated, 'more and more ESOL teachers use simulations because they are an ideal technique' that helps learners to use language creatively and communicatively (p.3). In short, despite being initially used in business and military, as the time goes by, simulations have become more and more familiar to both language learners and language instructors thanks to their practical values.

2.2. Values of simulations

Sam (1990) (as cited in Chouldhary, 2013) has enumerated several benefits of using simulations as a teaching technique in a language classroom. For him, this technique really 'stimulates authentic conversation' because the learners are forced to behave in a natural atmosphere that helps them overcome their fears and inhibitions. Richard (as cited in Chouldhary, 2013) has also agreed that simulations stimulate authentic learner-to-learner conversational interaction. Another benefit that simulations bring about to language teaching is that among the speaking activities, simulations are believed to bring about rare opportunity for the learner to use language freely and communicatively. Thus, they have been declared a main source of fluency activity (Sam, 1990). The next benefit of simulation has been identified as a teaching technique which is 'useful and more suitable for consolidating and practicing aspects of conversational proficiency than teaching new forms. Another added benefit of simulations is that they 'create sensitivity and a sense of awareness' (Chouldhary, 2013, p.256). They bring the real outside world in the classroom. They also initiate mental and bodily activity and ensure active participation of all learners. In addition, using simulations in English classes, as Sam (1990) has pointed out, is 'a break from routine.' He has stated that the use of simulations makes the atmosphere in the classroom less formal and, as a result, reduces tension. The final and possibly the biggest benefit of using simulations is that they prepare language learners for real life and handle real-life unpredictability (Chouldhary, 2013). Simulations have been proved to have the ability which prepares students to react to

extraordinary and unexpected situations and give students a real taste of life. In short, the summary of the above-mentioned benefits of using simulations in English classrooms is really practical to ELT practitioners who consider using this technique in their classroom with a view to enhancing their students' speaking abilities as well as preparing for the real life communication.

2.3. Factors determining the success of a simulation

2.3.1. The roles of the teachers

Teachers play a fairly important role in how successful the simulation is because teaching through a simulation requires a time commitment and carefully organizational scheme from the teacher. The role of the teacher includes designing or adapting the simulation to fit the unique needs of a group of students, teaching content/skills necessary to participate in the simulation, observing student interactions, monitoring and adjusting the simulation as necessary, assessing student learning, evaluating the simulation as a learning experience, and presenting the learning activity with great excitement and enthusiasm (Chilcott, 1996 as cited in Chouldhary, 2013). Besides, as each situation varies and there aren't any ready-made materials, each day's activities must be scheduled and materials be created accordingly. In addition, the teacher needs to allow time throughout the simulation for discussion. Because the teacher must do much of the work prior to the simulation being run, teacher time during the simulation is available for observation and coaching which are excellent ways to assess student learning. In a word, running a simulation successfully requires a lot of teachers' effort throughout the process, but the success of students in a well-designed, appropriate simulation is extremely rewarding for students and teachers.

2.3.2. The roles of the learners

In a simulation, the participation of the learners plays a decisive role in its success. Several stages are included in the process, starting from the formation of groups, to preparing for a simulation, then conducting a simulation, and finally partially evaluating and assessing a simulation. At each of these stages, collaboration among students and the teacher's instruction and supervision are of great importance because they may lead to either success or failure of the simulation.

Right from the moment the groups are formed, an issue is raised about whether or not students are of the same level linguistically. All possible alternatives are offered and considered. Students can be given the freedom to make their own choices and decisions.

After the formation of the groups is the preparation stage which requires detailed information about things that need to be done. For example, the preparation must be ensured to be detailed and adequate; students must be aware of the time available to them to conduct the simulation and its constituent parts, and what is expected of them at the various stages of the process.

Even when conducting a simulation, students' contribution may also help. For example, if students lack the necessary materials to run their simulation or if they may want certain modifications to the classroom settings, it is necessary that they raise their voice to seek help from the teacher and other classmates.

Finally, students themselves also have a role to play in the assessment. They may be asked to write a report on the contribution of the group members. Or they can be asked to assess on the performance of their friends.

2.4. Simulation design

2.4.1. Teaching goals

The first step in developing a simulation is defining the goals that the teacher wants to achieve. This step is very important because it determines the structure and methods of the simulation. It is useful

for teachers to write down their goals before beginning. By doing this, the goals are kept handy as the teachers create the structures of the exercise, and they can ever refer back to them when the simulation is over (Smith & Boyer, n.d.)

2.4.2. Simulation construction

The second step in creating a simulation is to identify all the major actors in the process of the simulation. As Smith and Boyer (n.d.) suggest, a ‘role sheet’ should be constructed for each player or group of players. Role sheets explain the positions of the player. If appropriate and useful, these role sheets may suggest how a player might further his or her goals. Role sheets should also reflect the structural or power relationships that exist in the real-world environment and how they should manifest themselves in the simulation.

The next task in this step is the creation of a scenario that interests and challenges students presenting a compelling issue or problems that requires thought and action on their part. Scenarios don’t really need to be very long or complex. They can just be as short as one page, but they must be clear enough for students to recognize that they are required to act and resolve the problem at hand. What is important for this task is assigning specific tasks to specific players so that the task is modelled after a real-world task. In addition, it is essential to provide any data or resources necessary for completing the assigned task. Newspaper articles, budgets, and assigned readings, as Smith and Boyer (n.d.) suggest, can provide necessary background. Such data can be provided through lectures, presented in hard copy at the start of the simulation, or the teacher might even require students to conduct research in advance. Such careful preparation certainly requires students to think about the simulation before it actually begins.

2.4.3. Running the simulation

Running a successful simulation depends much on the way it is organized. The scenario and role assignments should be handed out well before the simulation performance so that modifications could be made appropriately. The more complex the simulation, the more important it is to distribute roles well in advance, so that players have an opportunity to research their roles and think about strategy (Smith and Boyer, n.d.).

When students are given a role and a task to perform, they generally respond quite well. Thus, it is not necessary for teachers to worry if the simulation starts a bit slowly because this can be the first experience for many students in this type of learning environment and it may take them time to feel at home in the simulated world.

Besides, due to the complexity of the simulation, players may at times lose track of the task, the scenario, or the time. Then, it is the teacher’s responsibility to give careful monitoring, judicious coaching, or even intervention to keep the simulation moving.

2.4.4. Debriefing

Debriefing is widely believed to add value to the success of using simulations. Smith and Boyer (n.d.) have also summarized and proposed a list of suggested approaches to debriefing questions.

2.4.4.1. Open-ended questions that identify processes, goals, motivations, constrains and resources

These questions may include:

- What happened?
- Why was no consensus achieved?
- Is there a right answer?
- What angered you about this simulation? Why?
- What were the substantive issues? Were they the same for all players?

These guided questions allow students to further explain in their own words the political and institutional forces behind their behavior – an invaluable source of information for both teachers and students.

2.4.4.2. Interview of the major players about their goals, motivations and frustrations

This also allows students to explain in their own words the political and institutional forces behind their behavior.

Here are some examples:

- Mr. President, what exactly were you trying to accomplish and what prevented you from doing it?
- Madam Chairman, you are a presidential appointee, yet you quietly made a decision of which the president would not approve. What makes you so independent? How far would you go if you were really pushed?

2.4.4.3. Questions on communication

According to Smith and Boyer (n.d.), these questions can help uncover rules that may have developed implicitly during the game.

Below are some examples of questions on communication:

- To whom did you talk? Why?
- To whom did you NOT talk? Why?
- What impact did incomplete information have on your strategy?
- Whom did you trust? Why?
- Why did you not talk to the President?

2.4.4.4. Questions about the reality of the game

This type of question helps students recognize the degree to which the simulation mirrored real-world situations.

Examples of this type of questions can be:

- In what ways did the simulation diverge from reality?
- In what way was it similar to the real world?

These debriefing questions not only help the teacher and students look back at all the stages of the simulation that they have gone through, but also allow them to get information so that they may make modifications in the subsequent simulations.

Having studied and considered the simulation design as described above, the authors decided to use it in the Advanced Spoken Language Use course for the fourth-year students at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education. Feedback from teachers and students were also collected to analyze and make appropriate modifications for the subsequent courses.

2.5. Related studies on simulations

Over the past twenty years, a lot of research into the effectiveness of using simulations in English language teaching has been carried out.

Sam (1990) has conducted a research on the use of drama in communicative language teaching. He discussed the general concept of Communicative Approach and communicative activities and exploited two techniques: role-play and simulations. He concluded that the use of drama activities, such as role-

play and simulation could be used as a useful method in language teaching to provide a meaningful way of teaching and learning a language.

Tompkins (1998) also did a research on the effectiveness of role-playing and simulation in ELT. The researcher's conclusion was that in language teaching, role-playing and simulation techniques should be integrated with other language learning activities so that using them could be an extremely rewarding experience for both the students and the teachers.

Cecile (2001) (as cited in Choudhary, 2013) has conducted a study to observe whether role-play is an interaction which can effectively trigger the learning process in learning a foreign language. The researcher looked at the various learning strategies used by the students when role-playing. She concluded that during a role-play, learning does not occur on a traditional basis in which the teacher is the main player. In this technique, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator whose main responsibility is to share students' knowledge about themselves.

The findings have helped the authors of the present research identify the issues that have been conducted research on and the theoretical framework that they base on to construct the simulation for the ULIS 4th year students.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Identification of the problem

Teaching the language skills, especially speaking skill, has always been the focus of the curriculum at ULIS in general and of Faculty of English Language Teacher Education in particular. Usually the speaking skills are taught in combination with other language skills. Activities like discussions, impromptu speaking, presentation and debates are also included in the learning program. Language proficiency classes are mainly for the first two years at ULIS, and the last two years are mainly for students to learn content subjects. But the double major students – the students who cover both linguistic and business knowledge in their learning program – still have to take another course titled Advanced Spoken Language in Use as a compulsory subject during their internship, right before their graduation from ULIS. There is no point in repeating the procedure of the earlier speaking skills courses because this would bring the boredom to the students. Besides, as these students are going to graduate soon and start their own career, they must really need something practical that may help them in their career. The two above-mentioned reasons have urged the author to apply simulation techniques in this course for the fourth-year student at ULIS.

3.2. Aims of the study

The present study aims at:

- (a) introducing a model of teaching speaking skills through job search related simulations and
- (b) exploring both teachers' and students' feedback on the effectiveness of this model.

3.3. Procedures of designing the simulation and feedback collection

At first, the authors had a discussion with the Advanced Spoken Language Use course developer so that the job search simulation would be allowed to use in the course. Then a detailed syllabus, which includes all the stages of the job search simulation, was developed.

The simulation was run during the last semester of the students' years at ULIS. This semester lasted 15 weeks, including six weeks of student internship.

The feedback was done after the last group finished their performance. Questions for the debriefing stage were exploited to get feedback from students and informal talks with other teachers who ran the simulation were also exploited for further information.

The authors also applied Fishbanks' seven stages for debriefing as follows:

- describe the problems and events that occurred
- determine the extent to which those also occur in the real system
- decide what factors in the simulation were responsible for those problems and events
- determine the extent to which those factors are also present in the real system
- design changes in the simulations that would avoid or solve the most serious problems
- indicate corresponding changes that could be made in real system
- gain commitment from the real players that they will seek to achieve the necessary changes in the real system

Fishbanks (as cited in Choudhary, 2013)

Based on these stages, relevant questions were asked, and information was recorded for findings in the next part.

4. THE JOB SEARCH SIMULATION APPLIED TO 4TH YEAR STUDENTS AT ULIS AND INITIAL FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

4.1. The job search simulation applied to 4th year students at ULIS

As mentioned earlier, the job search simulation was used in the course Advanced Spoken English Use which is designed for the semester 8 – the last semester at university for students at ULIS. The whole semester lasts 15 weeks, six of those are for internship, but tasks of the simulation are still assigned for students to prepare.

The detailed syllabus is summarized in the table below:

Week <i>4 meeting hours/ each</i>	In-class	Self-study
1	Theory: CV <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classification - Samples Practice: Reading an authentic advert + Writing a CV.	Studying how to write a cover letter and collect at least one sample (Remember to mention the advertised job and source(s) of sample, and print your prepared material)
2	Theory: Cover letter Practice: Writing cover letter for the same post.	Collecting the questions often asked in interviews + suggest answer (if possible) (Remember to print your prepared material)
3	Practice: Brainstorming interview questions Interviewing each other within the same group. Grouping: groups of 4	Each interviewer chooses one company and the position they want to recruit. (Remember to print your prepared material) Note: Interviewees are allowed stay at home in the next session.

4	Discussion: Pairs of interviewers decide on one company and one position they wish to recruit, write the advertisement with eligibilities & discuss the procedure for the job interview (if possible)	Interviewers send the advertisement to interviewees. <i>Note: Interviewers are allowed stay at home in the next session.</i>
5	Interviewees work on their CV and cover letter, basing on the requirements mentioned in the advertisement.	
6	Assignment Requirements: Groups are supposed to complete all the preparation Interviewers:	
7	- A formal presentation to introduce about the company/organization and the position advertised.	
8	- Procedure of interview with a detailed content, especially questions and purposes of each question - Eligibilities of the post (Job description)	
9	- Job Advert Interviewees:	
10	- Seek background information of the company. - Predict the questions likely to be asked. - Rewrite a CV & a cover letter	
11	<i>Note: Email all the preparations for Teacher one week before students come back to class.</i>	
12	Students give presentations + conduct interviews + Teacher gives comment	Write a report
13	Students give presentations + conduct interviews + Teacher gives comment	Write a report
14	Students submit reports Teacher gets comments and feedback from students.	
15	Students submit reports Students conduct interviews + Teacher gives comment	Write a report

In order to run this job search simulation, students are asked to work in groups of four: two as interviewers and two as interviewees each time. Each of the students has to take turns the two roles as an interviewer and as an interviewee for the two rounds.

As interviewers, students need to ‘advertise’ the company/organization and the vacant position. Modifications can be made about the requirements of the jobs so that ULIS graduates can apply. Presentations about the company/organizations need to be enticing and persuasive so as to attract applicants. A list of interview questions also needs to be prepared with a clearly stated purpose for each of those questions so as the interviewer may check later on whether the candidate succeed in answering these questions. A report must be written after

the interview. The interviewers' report must include information, comments or remarks on the preparation and performance of each of the candidate. Besides, recommendations must also be given about the successful candidate in the interview, with evidence provided.

As interviewees, students have to study the advertised position, look up all information about the company/organization to make sure they are eligible to apply for that position. Then the applying students write their CVs, tailoring their CVs to be relevant to the job. A cover letter is also needed. Besides, interviewees should also be ready to answer questions at the interviews. Time should be given for students to rehearse to ensure a smooth performance for the final interview.

In shorts, this simulation requires much of students' involvement and participation. Each of the students must take their own responsibility for both individual and collaborative tasks for running a successful simulation.

4.2. Feedback from students and teachers on using the job search simulation in Advanced Spoken Language Use

As mentioned earlier, ideas for the debriefing stage were turned to questions to get feedback from about 50 students and six teachers. Their feedback could be categorized in three different groups: advantages of running the job-search simulation, disadvantages of running the simulation, and suggested ideas for improvement.

4.2.1. Advantages of running the job-search simulation in Advanced Spoken Language Use

Numerous benefits have been listed by the students who have run the job-search simulation. 'Relaxed learning environment' was something that many students liked. Instead of talking to the teacher, students mainly talked to their friends, which was certainly less tense and more relaxing. 'Practicality' was another benefit that a lot of students highlighted. In fact, the searching for jobs has always been ULIS final year students' primary concern on their graduation, so they were all very excited. In addition, in preparation for the simulation, students had to decide on the job they wanted to apply, write their own CVs and cover letters, find information about the company or organization and so on. All this exposure was really meaningful and practical to students' real job-search process after their graduation. The next advantage that students appreciated is their increased confidence after running the job-search simulation. Other benefits included improvement in better use of gestures and appropriate postures in the interview. The teacher's support and classmates' encouragement were also the treasure that many students valued when running the job-search simulation.

In terms of speaking skills, a variety of sub-skills were embedded and reinforced when students carried out the simulation. First, as interviewers, they had chance to give a formal presentation (about the company and the vacant job); to practise a Q and A session after the presentation, to role play as interviewers in the interview. Then, as interviewees, students had chance to practise impromptu speaking through answering the interviewers' questions; to use pragmatically correct language for job interviews, to improve negotiation skills and so on.

From the teachers' perspectives, the job-search simulation was really 'highly motivating'. This simulation really helped the students 'to change their identities' from pure students to either job-seekers or interviewers. Due to its 'real-world effects', one teacher remarked that 'students did not stop learning' when the class was over. Their interests carried over into 'informal out-of-class discussions' with other students and adults who valued and shared their ideas and experiences with them. All the teachers agreed that the job-search simulation was really authentic and practical to their students.

4.2.2. Drawbacks of running the job-search simulation in Advanced Spoken Language Use

Although running the job-search brought students a lot of practical benefits, it still caused some nuances for these senior students. First, the simulation process was interrupted due to the six-week internship, which resulted in the interruption between the group members. Second, some students expected the

simulation to be used for the second or third year students rather than the fourth year. They believed that even second or third year students could also benefit because many of them started to apply for part-time jobs during the first years at university.

From the teachers' viewpoints, the simulation was practical and meaningful. The only thing that these teachers complained about was the heavy workload when they had to mark both students' writings (CVs and Covering letters) and speaking skills (presentations and interviews). But in general, they all felt this satisfactory.

4.2.3. Suggested ideas for improvement

Some practical ideas for improvement have been suggested for the job-search simulation. First, the students expected that the simulation process would not be interrupted by the six-week internship. This would help them focus more on the tasks assigned to them by the teachers. Second, a number of students preferred this simulation to be used at the earlier stage of their university study. Two of the teachers also support to integrate this job-search simulation in other speaking courses.

5. CONCLUSION

The theories about using simulations in ELT classrooms and the findings from both students and teachers' have proved that the job-search simulation used for the Advanced Spoken English Use was appropriate and practical. The students' speaking skills have been improved through giving presentations, experiencing impromptu speaking, and dealing with negotiations. The teachers also felt motivated when applying this job-search simulation, despite some complaints about the too much workload for marking students' papers (as evidence of their learning).

Recommendations have also been made about separating the internship from this final semester to ensure the smooth flow of the simulation. Another suggested idea was about integrating the simulation in other speaking courses to give students chance to be exposed to job-search experience at an earlier stage of their student life. This can be taken into consideration in further research.

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