

Online Simulations in Academic Writing Class

Rota Bankava, Zigrīda Vinčela

Abstract. The article deals with the application of online interinstitutional simulation in the English language teaching at tertiary level. The purpose of the research was to investigate the adaptability of the Project IDEELS (Intercultural Dynamics in European Education through onLine Simulation) simulation in the academic writing course at the Faculty of Modern Languages, the University of Latvia. The research consisted of two phases. The first phase included the investigation of the source materials of the Project IDEELS. The aim was to focus on the features of the project that would enable to work out the institutional strategy for the integration of the simulation activities. The second phase was piloting of the students participation in the simulation in order to test the validity of the strategy. The simulation session demonstrated that the strategy ensured the integration of the simulation into academic writing course and enriched the course by providing the students with the opportunity to approach the learning tasks from various angles as well as experiment with innovative mode of learning.

Introduction

It is a fact that our modern society is facing a period of rapidly increasing internationalism. A direct contact with foreign cultures is often considered as normality. The need to prepare the students for a successful intercultural communication in multicultural society is becoming more essential, however, knowing a foreign language is not enough. Michael Byram (1997) in his report "Describing Intercultural Communication and the Intercultural Speaker" points out that for successful intercultural communication it is essential to develop not only linguistic but also the intercultural competence.

The structural framework of the traditional classroom instruction limits the implementation of the effective activities that could contribute to the development of the linguistic as well as intercultural competence of the students. The web-based instruction provides the educator with the possibilities to widen the range of the classroom activities. M. Warschauer (1997), V. Muehleisen (1997) and I. Brown (1999), who have considered the educational potential of the Internet, point out the possible advantages of the Internet application in FLT (foreign language teaching).

- 1 Linguistic nature of online communication is desirable for promoting language learning. The electronic discourse tends to be more lexically and syntactically complex than oral discourse.
- 2 The Internet creates optimal conditions for learning to write. For example, it provides authentic audience for written communication.
- 3 The Internet provides an access to unlimited, authentic and update information in the target language.
- 4 The Internet projects/activities are interactive. For example, even simple browsing is interactive as during this activity the students are choosing what they will look at next.
- 5 The Internet creates optimal conditions for projects/activities promoting the following modes of learning:

- 5.1 self-paced learning;
- 5.2 cooperative learning.

- 6 The Internet provides multimedia environment.
- 7 Learning computer skills can be essential to the students' future success.
- 8 The Internet can increase the students' motivation.

Anju Relan and Bijan B. Gillani (1997) highlight the following four ways in which the advantages of the Internet can be used in designing in web-based instructional strategies:

- 1 as a resource for the identification, evaluation, and integration of a variety of information;
- 2 as a medium of collaboration, conversation, discussion, and exchange of ideas;
- 3 as an international platform for the expression and contribution of artistic and cognitive understandings and meanings;
- 4 as a medium for participating in simulated experiences.

Thus, the Internet as a communication medium has opened up the possibility for the educators to initiate the students' participation in interinstitutional online simulations that provide genuine and natural intercultural experience for the students. Simulations are complex activities, which aim to provide the student with the reproduction of a part of a real or imaginary world. Simulations often involve students in making decisions and communicating or negotiating with one another (1994). Emphasizing the educational value of the Internet and the online simulations B. Rustoff (1998) stresses that it has been stated time and again that the best learning results are achieved if learners work as much as possible with authentic and semiauthentic materials which are situated in the context of authentic, real-world-based situations or simulations.

Within the framework of the cooperation between two Universities: the University of Bremen and the University of Latvia, the Faculty of Modern Languages of the University of Latvia has ventured to participate in the online simulation of the Project IDEELS (Intercultural

Dynamics in European Education through Online Simulation) launched by the University of Bremen. The IDEELS simulation is an intercultural virtual laboratory in which participants (educators and students) of the tertiary institutions throughout Europe are linked via collaborative learning process. On the one hand, during the simulation the students enter a fiction world as they consider a number of issues of importance in the fiction country of the European Federation. On the other hand, the IDEELS scenarios draw on real world statistics and events, and transpose them into the fictional European world. The scenarios may deal with any of the issues relevant to contemporary European realities (2001).

The integration of the online interinstitutional simulation in the academic writing course is impossible unless:

- 1 the teaching objectives of the simulation overlap with the teaching objectives of the academic writing course;
- 2 the activities of the simulation contribute to the teaching objectives of the academic writing course.

Goal of the research is to investigate adequacy of the simulation of IDEELS to both: the content and the goals of the academic writing course at the Faculty of Modern languages, University of Latvia.

Object of the research is the Internet project IDEELS as an innovative technique in teaching academic writing to the students majoring in English.

Enabling objectives are as follows:

- 1 to find out the areas in which the learning objectives of the academic writing course overlap with the learning objectives of the simulation;
- 2 to work out the institutional learning objectives for the simulation session;
- 3 to pilot the students' participation in pre-simulation, simulation and post-simulation activities;
- 4 to comment on the students performance and input during the simulation;
- 5 to sum up the students' insights about their participation in the simulation;
- 6 to sum up the integration principles of the online interinstitutional simulation in the academic writing course.

Research methods:

- 1 Theoretical study of the source materials of the simulation.
- 2 Piloting the students' participation in the simulation.
- 3 The students' classroom and online performance observation.
- 4 Questionnaires.

Procedure

The authors of the article have investigated the source materials of the IDEELS simulation as well as acknowledged the following four features that could enable the integration of the simulation activities in the academic writing course at the Faculty of Modern Languages.

- 1 Two-tiered approach to the defining the learning objectives.

- 2 Considerable flexibility concerning the choice of the team's profile and simulation activities.
- 3 Simulation software programme OPUSi enabling online observation of the students' input during the simulation.
- 4 The simulation activities that can serve as tools for the self-reflection of the learners about their own learning.

The first feature refers to the definition of the teaching objectives, but the rest of the three features refer to the achievement of the objectives initially defined.

To investigate the possible validity of the approach, the authors piloted the students' participation in the simulation.

Two student groups from the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Latvia participated in October—December 2000 simulation, which consisted of three phases: pre-simulation (2 weeks), simulation (3 weeks) and post-simulation (2 weeks). After the simulation the students wrote a test essay.

Results and Discussion

Acknowledgement of the four specific features of the IDEELS simulation resulted in the definition of the institutional objectives for the simulation session, choice of the pertinent activities, observation and analysis of the students' input and summarizing the students' insights about the simulation. Further each of these features will be considered separately.

The first specific feature of the IDEELS simulation is a two-tiered approach to defining the learning objectives: shared learning objectives that are common for all the participants of the simulation and specific learning objectives that depend on the objectives of the course the simulation is linked to. The shared learning objectives of the IDEELS simulation were to:

- 1 develop team skills (listening, contributing, organizing, giving feedback);
- 2 accept responsibility for achieving group goals;
- 3 create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect;
- 4 learn to trust;
- 5 learn to learn;
- 6 become more aware of one's own learning styles and needs;
- 7 take responsibility for one's own learning
- 8 develop the ability to respond flexibly to unexpected situations;
- 9 awareness, appreciation and respect for cultural differences;
- 10 develop cross-cultural and interdisciplinary communication skills.

In addition to the shared learning objectives, the authors have worked out a set of the following specific (or institutional) learning objectives for the simulation session consistent with the ones of the academic writing course:

- 1 to learn to recognize differences in written and spoken English;

- 2 to practice writing summaries, reports and formal letters;
- 3 to develop reading skills (skimming, scanning, intensive and extensive reading);
- 4 to develop hypertext reading skills;
- 5 to acquire new vocabulary relevant to the simulation and to learn to use it correctly;
- 6 to assume responsibility for the grammatical correctness and stylistic appropriateness of one's own writing;
- 7 to become more aware of one's own learning styles and needs;
- 8 to develop autonomy in language learning;
- 9 to define individual and group goals;
- 10 to accept responsibility for achieving individual and group goals;
- 11 to develop telecommunication skills.

The second specific feature of the IDEELS simulation is considerable flexibility in the choice of the team's profile and simulation activities. To ensure a successful flow of the simulation and to achieve the shared learning objectives of the simulation, the basic activities were tightly scheduled. However, there was a considerable flexibility that included:

- 1 the choice of the institutional teams' profile and pertinent simulation activities;
- 2 the choice and/or design of the subsidiary activities that would support the basic activities.
- 3 the choice and/or design of the pre-simulation and post-simulation activities.

Appendix 3 reflects the amount and the type of the basic activities experienced by the students of the Faculty of Modern Languages during the simulation. The basic activities were supplemented by subsidiary activities chosen or designed by the facilitators. All these activities contributed to the objectives of the simulation and the objectives of the academic writing course. The amount and type of activities chosen could vary with the each participating team as far as these differences did not conflict with the shared objectives of the simulation. This partly accounts for the marked difference in the number of the inter-team messages forwarded by various teams (appendix 4) during the simulation.

The third specific feature of the simulation is the online facility for the educators to observe the students' performance of their profile during the simulation session. This facility was provided by the simulation software programme OPUSi. The educators had a possibility to tap the simulation file any time and observe the students on line performance. Moreover, all written communication, which took place during the simulation (inter-team messages, papers, teleconferences), became a part of the database of the simulation software OPUSi and could be subjected to the educators' analysis. For example, while the students were writing their reports collaboratively, they went through the following steps of the writing process: planning, prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. The educators could observe the students' writing process online and they also had an access to all the drafts written

and edited by their students (see appendixes 1 and 2). Thus it was possible to analyse each participant's quantitative and qualitative input in the light of the shared and institutional objectives of the academic writing course.

The final of the specific features of the simulation is that some of the simulation activities (questionnaires, focus groups, essays) could serve as tools for the self-reflection of the learners about their own learning. These activities enabled the students to reflect themselves on the attainments and satisfaction gained from the Project IDEELS simulation. The student's insights can be summarized up as follows: the simulation

- 1 helped to enrich the students' vocabulary,
- 2 improved the students' grammar,
- 3 provided extensive practice in writing summaries, reports and letters,
- 4 provided extensive practice in hyper-text skimming and scanning,
- 5 helped to improve pertinent computer skills,
- 6 provided rich cross-cultural experience.

Conclusions

The results of the piloting the students participation in the simulation IDEELS prove to the fact that the following principles assured a successful integration of it into the academic writing course:

- 1 defining the institutional learning objectives for the simulations session;
- 2 the choice of the teams' profile and the activities contributing to the institutional learning objectives;
- 3 the choice and/or design of the subsidiary activities supporting the basic pre-simulation, simulation and post-simulation activities;
- 4 online observation of the student's performance during the simulation;
- 5 quantitative and qualitative analysis of each student's input during the simulation;
- 6 student's feedback about the simulation session.

Thus integrated interinstitutional online simulation can become effective teaching tool that:

- 1 supports the goals of the institutional course;
- 2 supports the individual goals of the student;
- 3 enriches the course content by innovative mode of learning;
- 4 develops student's intercultural competence.

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Internetinai imitavimai akademino rašymo kurse

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aprašoma, kaip taikomas internetinis situacijų imitavimas tarp skirtinguo aukštojo mokymo įstaigų, mokant anglų kalbos. Tyrimo tikslas buv patikrinti IDEELS (Intercultural Dynamics in European Education through Online Simulation (Kultūrinių ryšių dinamika Europos švietime, naudojant internetinį imitavimą) projekto pritaikomumą rašymo kursui Latvijos universiteto Šiuolaikinių kalbų fakultete. Tyrimas susidėjo iš dviejų fazų. Pirmojoje fazėje buvo nagrinėjama IDEELS projekto medžiaga. Šios fazės tyrimo tikslas buvo atkreipti dėmesį į tas projekto ypatybes, kurios padėtu paruošti institucijų strategiją imitavimo veiklos integravimui. Antroji fazė buvo skirta studentų dalyvavimo projekte pilotavimui strategijos validumui patikrinti. Imitavimo sesija pademonstaravo, kad tiriamą strategiją užtikrina imitavimo integravimą į akademino rašymo kursą ir praturtina jį tuo, kad suteikia studentams galimybę nagrinėti mokymosi užduotis įvairiais aspektais bei eksperimentuoti, naudojant naujus mokymosi būdus.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1. An extract from the team Policy Statement: the issues of unemployment (draft 1)

Date: 31.10.00. 13:20

Author: The student's name and surname

Title: Possible solutions to the unemployment problem

Unemployment is not a very essential problem for our country. It makes ca 11.5%. However, in order to prevent its possible increase, we have considered several ways of improving our economical system thus insuring new job places.

These are as follows:

1. Developing of the agriculture. Geographical position of our country allows gathering good harvests. Cultivating, gathering, processing, transporting and selling products create new job places.

2. Improving of the educational system. Providing possibility of studying foreign languages and computer sciences and rising professional education to the international level would lead to expanding of job market on the territory of the whole European Federation.

3. Developing of new technologies. Investing money in technical sciences, investigations, inventions and technical innovations. This would allow our country to become competitive in the world telecommunication market.

APPENDIX 2. An extract from the team's Policy statement: the issues of unemployment (draft 2)

Date: 31.10.00. 16:32

Author: The student's name and surname

Title: Problem of unemployment

A. Economical rights: unemployment.

1. However, unemployment is not a very serious problem for our country, it is a problem for other European countries. In order to prevent its possible increase and distribution on the whole territory of Eutropia, some economical measures can be taken. It would contribute to economical system of the whole Eutropia and insure new job places.

2. Recently there has been a certain rise of unemployment in our country. Therefore, some ways of preventing its future growth should be found.

B. Policy objectives.

The policy objectives of our country are as follows:

1. Developing of the agriculture.

Geographical position of our country allows gathering good harvests. Cultivating, gathering, processing, transporting and selling products would create new job places.

2. Improving of the educational system.

Providing the possibility of studying foreign languages and computer sciences and rising professional education to the international level would lead to expanding of job market on the territory of the whole Eutropia.

3. Developing of new technologies.

Investing money in technical sciences, investigations, inventions and technical innovations. This would allow our country to become competitive in the world telecommunications market.

4. Establishing new factories.

Factories processing agricultural products would provide a great number of new working places for people.

APPENDIX 3. The basic activities experienced by the students of the Faculty of Modern Languages during the simulation

Activities	Pre-simulation	Simulation	Post-simulation	Individual work	Team work
Teleconferences	—	5	1	—	+
Reports	2	1	—	—	+
Inter-team messages	—	48	—	—	+
Essays	—	—	1	+	—
Questionnaires	2	—	1	+	—

APPENDIX 4. All inter-team messages forwarded to recipients during the simulation (8)

Teams	CoCo	Bardland	Coastland	Highland	Midland	Northland	Southland	Free Speech	Edfor E	ECAG	Eu Com	EFFF	Eu Globe	Eu Wire	Info Watch	Legal Consult
CoCo	—	6	6	6	6	5	6	5	4	5	5	4	8	3	6	4
Bardland	3	—	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	4	2	3	3
Coastland	2	2	—	4	2	4	2	2	2	2	4	2	3	1	3	2
Highland	5	7	7	—	6	6	5	4	4	4	3	4	5	2	4	4
Midland	3	4	3	4	—	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	5	1	3	3
Northland	17	19	23	16	17	—	18	16	16	14	20	14	16	13	17	14
Southland	9	9	9	9	10	9	—	9	9	9	10	9	11	6	9	9
Free Speech	4	4	3	4	5	4	3	—	3	3	3	3	3	2	4	3
Edfor E	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	—	3	2	2	2	2	3	2
ECAG	7	8	8	9	10	10	10	9	10	—	11	9	9	8	10	9
Eu Com	9	9	9	9	11	14	11	9	9	10	—	9	9	6	10	12
EFFF	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	—	0	0	0	0
Eu Globe	7	8	7	6	6	7	6	6	6	6	6	—	4	6	6	6
Eu Wire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	—	0	0	0
Info Watch	10	10	12	9	10	10	10	9	9	8	7	8	12	5	—	6
Legal Consult	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	—

