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Hotel Receptionists and Customers : Making The Most of Computer Simulations in The Foreign-Language Classroom

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Abstract

The paper suggests ways in which one specific simulation program, Hotel Excelsior, can be linked in with ordinary foreign-language classroom work in order to practise not only oral communication but also, depending on the learning objectives set up by the teacher for the teaching period in question, any (or all) of the three other categories of language skills (listening, reading and writing). The suggestions include pre-computer, computer and post-computer phases providing opportunity for individual, pair and/or group work according to the teacher's choice.

Computer programs and foreign-language teaching

In the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Liflander (1992) distinguishes four different types of learning depending on how the computer is used, i.e. process learning, simulation learning, hypermedia learning and tool learning. Drill and exercise programs usually promote students ' process learning, whereas simulation programs (and some adventure programs) generally promote simulation learning. Various databases (especially those making use of multimedia components) typically promote hypermedia learning in students, whereas word processing programs and electronic mail facilities do the same as far as tool learning is concerned.

One of the most important objectives of foreign-language teaching is to develop students' communicative skills in the foreign language. In classroom situations where students do not experience real communicative needs in the foreign language this objective can, however, sometimes constitute a serious problem to the teacher. The same may be true if the teacher concentrates his teaching on grammar and vocabulary, forgetting, as it were, that formal language knowledge alone cannot provide students with the speed and accuracy that oral communication in a foreign language always presupposes.

From the teacher's point of view, Liflander's learning categories (1992) are important since they take into account not only learning as such but also the interactional relationship between the computer and the student. One can say that students working with programs which promote process learning are, in Wyatt's terms, responders rather than initiators (Wyatt 1987). The computer motivates, instructs and possibly assesses the students who, by following the pre-determined learning paths of the program, learn from the computer in compliance with the high-or low-level learning objectives set by the programmer or the teacher. Wyatt calls such programs instructional programs.

Students working with programs which promote simulation learning can be said to be primarily initiators who take more responsibility for their learning. Programs of this kind typically include elements of discovery learning, making the students learn both with the computer and from it. When working with

programs which promote tool learning, finally, the students are entirely responsible for their learning. Wyatt (1987) refers to programs of these two kinds as collaborative and facilitative programs, respectively.

Simulation programs

Higgins and Johns (1984) describe simulations as programs where the consequences of decisions or actions taken by the students are represented on the computer screen. Simulation topics usually range from business management to political decision-making and typically allow students to carry out experiments which would take too long to conduct in real life or which could have dangerous consequences (see also Davies & Higgins, 1985). Simulations are generally very motivating and require a great deal of engagement on the part of the students in so far as concentration and thinking are concerned. Their levels of realism obviously vary with the type of simulation.

The concept of "time" is an interesting factor. In some simulations time "pauses" while the students make their decisions. The new situation, irrespectively of whether five minutes or one hundred years of presumed program time have passed, becomes evident to the students immediately after they have pressed <ENTER>. In other simulations program time equals real time, making it very essential that the students learn to react quickly and correctly. Typical examples are flight simulations, where the consequences can be disastrous if the pilot/student cannot find the correct key in time of if he presses the wrong key. From a language-methodological point of view, simulations of the first type are sometimes better in that they give students who work alone more time to consider their options, while students who work in pairs have both the time and opportunity to discuss their options and agree on the best possible strategy to follow.

On CALL methodology

Using computer programs in class typically involves the planning of a teaching unit which includes both pre-computer, computer ("hands-on") and post-computer phases (see e.g. Hardisty & Windeatt, 1989). The sections below suggest ways in which the teacher can link in one specific simulation program, Hotel Excelsior, with ordinary classroom work while at the same time maintaining relatively great freedom to vary the possible uses of the program depending on the learning objectives, methods, type of language skill, the proficiency level of the students and the length of the teaching period in question. Although the suggestions concern one specific program, the ideas presented are in principle applicable to all simulations in that they contain many of the methodological principles which are necessary for long-term learning to take place, i.e. student activity, motivation, understanding, creativity, variety, repetition and successful learning.

About Hotel Excelsior

Hotel Excelsior (Clarke, 1989) simulates the work of a receptionist at the desk of one of four small hotels situated either in England, France, Germany and Spain. When the program has started, the receptionist must first choose the country he wants to work in. If England is chosen, the computer displays the following menu:

1. CURRENT PRICE LIST
2. ROOM AVAILABILITY
3. RESERVATION SERVICE
4. GUEST RECORDS
5. CALCULATE THE BILL
6. CANCEL A BOOKING

By choosing option 1, the receptionist gets a display of a list of current room and meal prices. Option 2 displays the rooms in the hotel and tells him which are occupied and which are vacant. The information is automatically updated when guests are registered and checked out. Option 3 allows the receptionist to register guests and information concerning their names, titles, addresses, number of nights requested, etc. By consulting option 4, he can check whether specified guests are registered in the hotel. Option 5 allows him to check the current balance of a specified guest's bill and, if wanted, check a guest out. Option 6, finally, allows him to cancel a guest's booking. The program handbook (Clarke, 1989) contains photocopiable pages of the hotel floor plan, practical information about the hotel and two different guest record sheets.

a) The pre-computer phase

Whichever the most appropriate time for using Hotel Excelsior in class, the teacher must first preteach (or repeat) the vocabulary,

phrases and grammar points needed by the students for the computer phase. He can for instance activate the students' knowledge about the topic by asking them to make individual lists of all the words which come to their minds when they see or hear the words "hotel" or "hotel reception". This activity not only increases the students' expectations concerning the assignment but most probably also their receptivity to learning owing to an increased memory activity in their brains (cf. Buzan, 1991). Furthermore, it will also increase the effects of positive transfer, i.e. earlier knowledge used as a basis for new knowledge (cf. Ringbom, 1987).

The teacher then introduces the program to the students (if it is new to them) and explains in detail what they are expected to do. He also distributes any handouts and teaching aids needed.

b) The computer phase

Planning a computer-assisted teaching session obviously depends to a large extent on the number of computer terminals available. For the present purposes, however, let us presume that there are three computer sets available and that the number of students participating is about 20.

The three computers are placed in different corners of the classroom and represent different hotels in a small town (or in different countries if the teacher wants the students to practise several foreign languages during the session). Three students (or six students taking turns or helping one another) assume the roles of receptionists. The remaining students receive one assignment card each from a pack of cards placed on a table in the fourth corner of the classroom. They are asked to carry out their assignments as quickly and efficiently as possible and then come back for a new card. Used cards are placed at the bottom of the pack of cards and new cards are taken from the top of the pack. The teacher walks around in the classroom helping students whenever necessary. He may also have to remind them that all conversation be carried out in the foreign language.

Ten sample assignment cards :

1. Your name is K and you come from a country of your own choice. Go to one of the hotels. Ask for a single or double room, but preferably one with a bath. Check in for three nights if they have a suitable room for you.

2. Your name is M. Go to Hotel A, ask for your bill and check out. Then go to Hotel C and check in for two nights.

3. You represent a group of four people from the country of S. Go to all the hotels and ask for the number of guests. Find out whether bath and breakfast are included in the room price. Then check in at the hotel which has the smallest number of guests.

4. You are looking for person Y. Go to the three hotels and find out whether he is staying in any of them. Check in at the same hotel if you find him, but change rooms so that the two of you get a double room.

5. Your name is Z. You have forgotten the name of the hotel you are registered in. Find out which one it is.

6. You are staying in Hotel C. You are not happy with your single room but want a double room with a bath instead. If the hotel has not got any vacant double rooms you must check out and consult the other hotels.

7. Check out of the hotel. Ask for a receipt and book a single room for two nights the following week.

8. Go to all hotels and ask for a list of all guests coming from a specific country of your choice. If there are such guests, find out who they are and how long they are staying.

9. Check out from the hotel. Tell the receptionist that you have no cash, but that you are willing to come back and pay after you have been to a bank. If he does not accept your proposal, try to borrow money from the other people in the reception.

10. Go to Hotel A and release the receptionist (or his assistant). Ask him

to take your assignment card with him and get a new one for himself.

These suggestions, obviously, are by no means exclusive : a creative teacher can easily make modifications and come up with ideas for additional assignment cards. The important point is that with carefully designed assignment cards which are available in suitable numbers, the teacher can activate all students simultaneously in a purposeful way. Moreover, if there is a queue in front of a reception, the teacher can tell the students to make conversation with each other while queueing ("Who are you?", "Where do you come from?". "How long have you been here?" etc.). He can also tell the students not to show their assignment cards to anyone, which will force them to spell out their names when registering. If the number of students is more than 20, other service points can be created, e.g. bank, a travel agency and an information desk, where the students take appropriate notes of whatever the other students have to report.

Even if the time factor is of minor importance in Hotel Excelsior, it is obvious that some degree of speediness is required from the receptionist at the computer keyboard. This speediness is put to the test especially in cases where queues emerge and where the receptionist must attend to guests' requests both correctly and efficiently. His language skills are also put to the test in cases where the guests manage the foreign language unequally well : in some cases they may even use another foreign language than the one expected by the receptionist (especially when the three hotels represent three different countries).

c) The post-computer phase

When the students have finished working with the program, the teacher can ask them to prepare individual reports based on their experiences during the computer phase to be either presented orally in class or handed in writing. He may also make them practise the program vocabulary and language functions through new roleplay activities or one-to-one interviews (with one student in each pair playing the part of a reporter and the other that of a receptionist or hotel guest). By varying the instructions, he can easily transfer the emphasis onto specific grammar points instead, e.g. to the practice of conditional sentences ("What do you think would have happened if....?").

Conclusions

Simulations typically have the potential to generate interest in students and demand active participation. In general, the post-computer phase is the phase during which the teacher has the best opportunity to vary and individualise teaching owing to the fact that the learning objectives are his own and the subsequent classroom activities therefore fully under his control. However, with simulations such as Hotel Excelsior the teacher can vary and individualise teaching also during the computer phase with the help of the assignment cards.

In fact, depending on the teacher's creativity he can easily incorporate various degrees of elements typical of programs promoting process learning and tool leaning even if the program used is one that promotes primarily simulation learning. In this particular case it is entirely up to the teacher's specific teaching objectives (and, of course, the proficiency level of the students) to what extent he wants to practise for example, greetings and standard phrases needed at the reception desk (process learning), speed and accuracy at the keyboard (tool learning) and communication in the foreign language in general (simulation learning). It is also essential that the teacher supervise and provide help whenever the students need help to express themselves during the computer phase and that the planned post-computer activities concentrate on oral work where the simulation events experienced during the computer phase give the students something meaningful to talk about.

Assuming, finally, that semantically related words are stored together in student's mental lexicons in different kinds of associative networks (as suggested e.g. in Meara, 1984 and Gairns & Redman, 1986), the teacher can profitably use the post-computer phase to improve the vocabulary knowledge of his students, for example, by asking them to arrange the words pretaught and subsequently used during the computer phase into various types of "mind maps" (see Buzan, 1991; Palmberg 1990, 1993) and at the same time make the practice of all language skills in the foreign language as meaningful and enjoyable as possible.

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