Chapter 8.4

Language Simulations for Fostering Language Acquisition and Communicative Competence in Adult Second-Language Learners

Angelene McLaren
Wayne State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Language teachers and students are making a mass exodus in theory and practice in the field of second-language instruction. They are leaving behind boring drills, nonsensical memorizations and endless strings grammatical rules and are demanding a shift from traditional language learning to modern language acquisition. Language acquisition means being culturally literate and commutatively competent in a language (Byrnes, 2001). This change requires finding effective ways to facilitate this paradigm shift. This chapter will try to answer the following questions: Can language simulations foster language acquisition and communicative competence in adult second-language learners? It will also explore: what language acquisition is and how it is obtained; theoretical foundations of language acquisition; learning simulations and what makes them effective; language simulations – how and why they work; what simulations can do to promote communicative competence; a practical example; future applications and importance of language simulations; and what future research is necessary to fulfill this promise.

INTRODUCTION

How many of us can remember sitting through long, boring, tortuous, endless hours of drills and memorization for Spanish, French, German, Latin, or whatever the second-language requirement was

in high school? How much of that language have we retained today? Were we acquiring language, or were we learning it? This chapter will investigate the role multimedia simulations can play in language acquisition and particularly in the development of communicative ability in adult second language learners.

BACKGROUND

The past few decades have seen a huge paradigm shifts in theory and practice in the field of second-language instruction (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Researchers and practitioners have moved away from language teaching and have shifted toward instead to language acquisition via communicative language teaching. The field of communicative language teaching stresses the development of communication skills over memorizing vocabulary and verb conjugation tables (Savignon, 1997).

Acquiring a language goes far beyond learning the names of things; it requires being communicatively competent in the target language. Communicative competence is defined here as a person's ability to communicate in a target language in an appropriate way, (Hymes, 1972), which also may include non-verbal behavior. Teaching "language" has proven to be ineffective in attaining acquisition and fluency in second language learners (Horwitz, 1986). What research is now showing is that second language acquisition and communicative competence are best acquired in situations where learners are using language for communicative purposes, in realistic extra-linguistic, as well as verbal contexts (Garcia-Carbonell, Rising, Monero & Watts, 2001; Wesche, 1983; Krashen, 1982).

Crookall and Oxford (1990a, 1990b), feel that multimedia simulations may prove to be extremely effective in this in developing learners' ability to communicate effectively in second languages. Simulations that incorporate effective instructional

pedagogy can not only fun, which improves learner motivation, but effective as well (Aldrich, 2005; Prensky, 2002; Crookall & Oxford, 1990a, 1990b).

Contemporary applied linguists are inquiring into ways native speakers acquire first language, and are creating from these insights new models, methodologies, and practices for second-language acquisition. Babies do not acquire language through endless hours of vocabulary drills, memorization, and grammatical rule. As it turns out, current research is showing that second-language learners don't either (Wesche, 1983). Researchers have discovered that second languages are acquired most effectively in meaningful, naturalistic environments.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Applied linguists are quick to point out the important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. According to Krashen (1982), language acquisition is a subconscious process. Children acquire language through interaction with their primary caregivers and the surrounding environment. The necessity to communicate their needs is what enables acquisition to take place. Babies are unaware of the fact that they are acquiring language. They are only aware of the fact that they are using language to communicate with those around them. It would be virtually impossible for babies and young children to memorize all the intricate rules and patterns inherent in all languages, and how to use them accurately.

Early behaviorists believed children linguistic outputs were a result of stimulus and response (Freeman & Freeman, 2004). This notion, however, has since been disproved. It is the through exposure to, and interaction with meaningful communication that first languages are acquired (Krashen, 1982). In terms of second language acquisition in children, the process mirrors that of first language acquisition almost identically. Teachers of these students tend to stress com-

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