

DESIGNING COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR BUSINESS LETTER WRITING

Cristina PRELIPCEANU

Abstract

As contexts for writing are not always easy to create, especially for students whose future needs in English are difficult to predict, in this article we have chosen to describe simulation as a very efficient and productive method used in business writing activities.

Keywords: letter writing, simulation, role-play

Preliminary considerations

Teaching experience shows that specific activities can be organized in the classroom with very productive results by role-play and simulation exercises.

In a psycho-pedagogical meaning, simulation means (according to English & English), "a training situation that employs in the learning period, conditions and equipment like those in which the learner is to perform later".

The very nature of the simulation makes it particularly suitable for use in ESP class. First, it is obvious enough that a specific situation, task or problem with which the learner may later find him faced, can be simulated in the classroom and this gives him both training and rehearsal in using the language he will later need. Secondly, simulation stimulates communication through an attractive activity in which the students can use their specialist knowledge. Thirdly, simulation provides both **guidance** in the form of a well-defined **setting** and **motivation** for executing the writing tasks.

Simulation structure

A simulation is usually structured in three phases (see Appendix 1).

In **phase one**, the situation and the task are presented to the participants. A certain amount of background information devised by the teacher is given to the participants (materials to be read and listened to). Another component contrived by the teacher is the specification of the roles of the participants. This is done by **role cards**, which either define or suggest, depending on the role to be played. We may also, either on the role cards or through a preliminary oral briefing, help the learners with certain items of language which they can use in their activities.

In **phase two**, the teacher divides the class into groups (ideally, each group should have no more than three or four students), with each group representing a different **company**. At this stage it is not accuracy but fluency that is the objective; the teacher is in turn **monitor**, **manager** and linguistic **informant**. The teacher gives each group a card and uses observation sheets as a guide to find out the students' real needs.

Phase three, the feedback stage, is in some ways the most valuable stage of the simulation. It is a stage of assessing the students' performance, discussing the errors and providing remedial work. It is important to give them a positive feedback and that is why we have made us our aim to establish a set of criteria and to discuss the results according to such criteria.

Activities in the business letter writing class

In this paper we are going to describe a simulation activity we have practised with our third-year business students leading to the writing of complaint letters and letters of adjustment. First we introduced the business situation and asked the students to read the following case silently.

The company **Digoin** of Calais, France sold the firm **Aspect Mail Order Ltd.** of Brighton, England - 20 cases of porcelain ware. The goods were packed by **Kent & Clarke Ltd.** and loaded on board the **S.S. Elinor Ferguson** owned by **International Shippers Ltd.** When the **S.S. Elinor Ferguson** arrived at Brighton yesterday the ship's agents noticed that case no.14 was damaged, and notified **Aspect Ltd.** accordingly. They immediately had the case opened and examined by Lloyd's agents there.

The number of articles in the cases tallied with the packing list, but there were a number of pieces broken, chipped or scratched (list of damaged articles enclosed).

Once we were sure that the students understood the situation presented, we divided them into four groups of three or four students. The teams were carefully arranged to ensure that they were well-balanced mixed-ability groups.

After grouping the students we gave each group a card. The role cards gave some further information and told the students what they had to write and to whom.

The cards were structured at two levels: advanced, leaving more space for students' creativity and intermediate level giving students more guidance (including a letter plan, tips on style, etc). In groups the students started working together to produce their first letter. They had to discuss exactly what to write and helped each other. Once the students finished writing they sent their first letter to the appropriate company. Meanwhile, they may have received a letter from one of the other groups and after having read and corrected the received letter, they wrote their second letter in reply to the letter they had received. Then they again delivered it to the appropriate group.

The students were supposed to write letters of complaint and adjustment. After the students had finished writing and sending the second letter, there followed the feedback stage (usually in a separate lesson).

We asked the students to look through the letters they received from the other students and to mark.

Marking is maximally effective in enabling students to improve only if it provides constructive feedback, which can be channelled into the process of redrafting and editing.

What are we actually looking for in our students' writing?

First of all, we are looking for the skills involved in the process of composing, i.e: having a sense of purpose, a sense of audience, a sense of direction, as well as skills connected with "crafting".

Students need positive feedback on the way their writing is improving and this may be received through comments at the end of a piece of writing or through a grade of some kind. How can we help our learners to see how their writing is developing and can be further improved?

That is the reason why together with the students we tried to establish a number of evaluation criteria, such as: aim, approach, motivation, task design, task adaptation (see Appendix 2).

In the final discussion, all the students found the activity very useful because it was 'real' in the sense they could see themselves doing this kind of work.

Students do tend to write better if they know that other people in the class are going to read what they have written. Hence the necessity of having a display board of some kind in the classroom.

References and bibliography

- Cuenca, C. M.** 1989-1990. *What makes an activity truly communicative in the foreign language class*, in "Modern English teacher", 17, 1, and 2, 49-53.
- English, H., English A.** 1958. *A comprehensive dictionary of psychology and psychoanalytical terms*, London: Longmans.
- Gilbs, G.** ed. 1974. *Handbook of games and simulation exercises*. London, Spon.
- Herbert, D., Stutridge, G.** 1971. *ELTI Materials profiles simulation*. London: The British Council.
- Holden, S.** 1977. *English for specific purposes*, Loughborough: Modern English Publications.
- Hutchinson, T., Waters, A.** 1987. *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hyland, K.** 1991. *Communicative theory in the language classroom*, in 20-24, 17, 3 and 4. "Modern English teacher".
- Jones, K.** 1982. *Simulations in language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Littlejohn, A.** 1988. *Company to companzy*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Preliceanu, C.** 1993. *Simulation in teaching business letter writing in Zeitschrift der Germanisten-rumäniens*. București: Cristopher Style.

The author

Dr. Cristina Preliceanu is a Reader in the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. She holds a PhD in *the economic and commercial language in Romanian and English* and has published a monograph and many studies on the topic, as well as several academic course books. Her main scientific pursuits are connected with issues in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching, reflected in various contributions to scientific journals and papers presented at several national and international conferences and symposia

Appendix 1

THE STRUCTURE OF A SIMULATION

PHASE I

Information input
Task
Rules
Background

Linguistic input
Drills
Exercises
Strategies

PHASE II

Group Work
(teams)

Role cards
letter writing and the exchange of letters

PHASE III

Feedback
Assessment of performance
(assessment criteria)
Discussion of errors
Remedial work

Linguistic input

(adapted from Gill Stutridge)

*Appendix 2***GRADING CRITERIA**

1. Organization of content (clarity, coherence, paragraphing linking devices)	20
2. Sense of audience and style	15
3. Lexical and grammatical complexity	20
4. Accuracy of conventions (layout, formulas, etc)	20
▪ grammar	
▪ sentence structure	
▪ spelling	
▪ punctuation	
5. Creativity of solutions given (realistic, appropriate to the situations)	<u>25</u>

(adapted from T. Hedge)

*Appendix 3***CARD I****(Buyers)****(Intermediate level)**

You work in the **Aspect Mail Order Ltd.**, 61 Bath Rd. Brighton, England, WR 5, 3 AB.

Write a letter to the company **Digoin of France**, Avenue Ravigny 14, Calais, making a strong complaint about the damaged goods. Demand compensation or replacement.

Intermediate level

Letter plan:

- say what has happened;
- demand that they replace the broken pieces and allow a rebate for the chipped and scratched pieces.

CARD II**(Sellers)****(Advanced level)**

SYNERGY volume 5, no. 1/2009

You work in the sales department of the company **Digoin of Calais**, France, sellers of porcelainware. You have just received a phone call from your representative in Brighton to tell you what has happened. You write to the packing company **Kent & Clarke Ltd.**, South Bank House, Borough Rd, London SE 1 to complain about the damaged goods and ask them to send you a full report.

CARD III (PACKERS)

You work with the packing company **Kent & Clarke Ltd.**, South Bank House, Borough Rd, London SE 1. You have just received a memo from your GM.

Memorandum:

To: Consumer Relations

Date:

From: G.M.

Subject: Digoin, Calais
damaged goods

Please find enclosed a copy of the surveyor's report on the damaged goods at **Aspect Mail Order Ltd.** This shows that the goods were inappropriately handled during unloading. Please write to **International Shippers Ltd**, City House, City Road, London EC 2 IPC, and ask them to acknowledge it was their fault and to offer compensation.

CARD IV (SHIPPING COMPANY) (Intermediate level)

You work with the **International Shippers Ltd**, City House, City Road, London EC 2.
(Public Relations)

You write to **Kent & Clarke Ltd.**, South Bank House, Borough Rd, London SE 1. You have just heard of what has happened (by phone). You decide to write immediately to your partners **Kent & Clarke Ltd.**, South Bank House, Borough Rd, and show your regret for damage they suffered which was mainly due to rough sea.

Letter plan

- say you are very sorry for the inconvenience caused;
- it was mainly due to rough sea;
- they admit that it was partly their fault and offer to pay a 25% compensation.