SIMULAB and the simulation concept

1. The simulation concept

SIMULAB is a concept that involves WWW-based communication between language students across national borders, around a specific problem or "simulation".

The concept of simulation used in this pedagogical approach is based on the French "simulations globales", developed in the 70s and 80s. The term simulation is here used for an activity that is based on roleplay and involves the use of fictional identities for a negotiation between different groups that will try to solve a problem together.

Paradoxically enough, the use of a fictional frame makes the communication more real. Simulations aim at restoring the natural communicative status of a language, a status that is often difficult to recreate in a traditional teaching situation. The main objective of the simulation is therefore to develop the communicative language skills of the students.

Language teachers are familiar with the principle of simulation in oral roleplay exercises of the type "Imagine you are in an unknown town and need to ask for directions". These small roleplays, however, are not real simulations because they only create isolated and limited communication situations. Simulations do not only simulate individual situations, but create a whole communication scenario in the classroom, in which the students learn the language by using it according to the rules and structures set by the environment. This environment can be a village, a group of people living in a block of flats or a community of any kind.

According to Ken Jones (*Simulations in Language Teaching*, 1992), "there is no substitute for simulations in language teaching. No other classroom technique provides the same blend of reality and responsibility within a language context. (...) In a simulation there is reality of function, not pretence. The chairman in a simulation really is a chairman, with the full power and responsibilities of chairmanship. (...) A simulation is an event. It is not taught. The students become participants and shape the event. They have roles, functions, duties and responsibilities (...) within a structured situation involving problem solving and decision making. The teacher, as Controller, introduces the simulation and is in charge of the mechanics of who is who, and who sits where. But the Controller does not interfere with the decision making and is thus in an excellent position to monitor the language, behaviour and communication skills of the participants."

2. The SIMULAB concept

The SIMULAB concept is based on the type of simulations described by Jones, but has developed a stronger emphasis on international contact and realistic communication through interaction in transnational groups.

Simulations, then, are problem solving roleplay situations in which students have to communicate to negotiate an issue on the basis of a fictional but realistic manuscript. The concept allows for great flexibility in the length of the activity, the theme and the number of participants, but it does depend on a predetermined structure. The simulation scripts can be adapted to different languages, themes, levels or specific language needs.

Even though individual, isolated students engaged in ODL activities can and will participate in simulations, most simulations will be based on a network of classroom groups. Ideally these groups will be placed in different nations, but will have the target language in common.

All student groups (preferably not more than 3 or 4 in each simulation) are presented with a problem that has to be solved by the whole network. Each group gets a "group identity" that will differ from that of the other groups. Within each group the students will then have to choose and define their own personal identity, which will be identical with the role they play in the simulation. Since both the group's and the individual identities will be placed within the frame of the culture pertaining to the target language, students will be faced with the need to find relevant information about that culture, thus enhancing the language learning. During this phase, most of the activities will be centred around discussions in class. Computer communication will be used only as a source of information.

Once the individual identities have been established, the students will start the communication with the other groups in the network, by introducing themselves in their new personalities. The second phase of the activity can then start: the students in each group will discuss among themselves what will be their first suggestion for a solution of the problem presented to the network. Once they have agreed on a strategy, they will communicate it to the other groups. On the basis of those suggestions, negotiations can begin. Because the student groups have spent some time discussing the problem, they "own", psychologically speaking, the suggestion that their group presents. The need to "fight" for their solution, which will surely arise during the negotiation phase, will create the basis for genuine communication. But discussions of this type could go on forever. There is a need for a good structure and firm guidance by the teachers involved, if the activity is to be successful.

3. The TELSI software

Several years ago, experienced language teachers in Finland began to use the Internet as a means of communication between groups that participated in a simulation. The first pilot groups used primitive e-mail systems. Conferencing systems on the Web were tried later, but it soon became obvious that, in order to optimize the pedagogical results of the simulation activity, it would be necessary to create customized, WWW-based software. A consortium of partners representing European educational institutions in six different countries was formed, and two applications (one Socrates Adult Education, the other Telematics in Education and Training) were sent to the European Commission. The result of these two projects, which have a common concept but very different areas of activity, is SIMULAB - a customized environment with pedagogically designed, proved and evaluated scripts for language learning.

The scripts run in the first phase of the Socrates project, were run on a standard conference environment (Monarch). This proved abundantly the need for a customized environment which would help structure the activity, organize the different types of communication in different folders, documents and conferences, and - last but not least - provide the teachers with tools that made them independent from a system operator with exclusive access to the server should the need arise to edit or delete a document that had already been registered.

The SIMULAB laboratory, based on the specially designed TELSI software, is an Internet-based tailor-made environment for role-play activities in language learning. The environment consists of a flexible system of authoring tools, which allows any language teacher to create simulations on the Internet for their pupils. This includes systems that give access to internal e-mail systems within a group; communication with others outside the SIMULAB environment; internal "chat" forums in real-time; automatic creation and editing of documents on-line - without the need to learn any HTML-codes - and easy linking to chosen Internet sites. The systems allows the inclusion of graphics and sound and video files, and has been designed to allow for further developments in Web applications.

The TELSI software provides every simulation with its own customized space. One of the teachers involved in the simulation acts as "coordinator" within the environment. The coordinator can create the necessary usernames and passwords, an adequate number of folders where the users can create their documents, and a number of mailing lists, or conferences. Both folders, documents and conferences, can be configured to give reading and writing rights to different users. This allows, for instance, the teachers involved in the simulation to communicate in a conference which is open only to them and not to the students. It is also possible for the teachers to create "hidden" documents - documents that will be ready but invisible until they become relevant to the simulation at a later date.

Although it is advisable for all teachers involved to become very familiar with the software, only one teacher in each simulation needs to learn how to set up the whole environment, create users, etc. The role of coordinator can also be played by an outsider to the simulation, provided he or she is in constant contact with the teachers involved.

4. Dissemination of the SIMULAB concept

The SIMULAB project is currently actively disseminating in Europe, the US and Asia. The consortium will organize four annual workshops in different countries. A CD-ROM with a walk-through of the TELSI software is being prepared and will be released in Jan 2000. Educators from all over the world are welcome to get acquainted with the SIMULAB concept through the free Teacher Simulations which are being organized.