Report on the Project

Enhancing Communication Skills through Online Role-Plays in Language Classes

This project aimed to design a model for online role-plays in language classes, which combines the positive outcomes of role-plays with the advantages of e-learning tools to improve the student language learning experience. We hoped to generate a tool focused on the students' written and reading skills by providing students with a fairer, safer and more flexible learning environment in which they could express themselves in writing in the target language.

Phase 1: A well attended workshop facilitated by an expert on online role-plays in language classes inspired a discussion where several key areas of a generic didactic model were identified: Outcomes, scenario, roles, tasks, communication, IT-Software and support, phases (Introduction, gaming, debrief & reflection), assessment (quantitative and qualitative), role of language tutor and level of online activity (blended or online only approach).

Phase 2: Based on the outcomes from Phase 1 as well as evidence from independent research, Phase 2 aimed to establish general rules as well as to define parameters of a successful online role-play model. The following insights were arrived at:

Definition of outcomes: Outcomes with regard to language, culture and general skills must be determined. This may include building, strengthening or deepening of specific vocabulary, sentence structure, culturally appropriate behaviour, team building and management skills.

Setting: The scenario needs to be engaging, authentic, related to the target language and culture, and it needs at a level that allows students at an intermediate language level to chat in the target language about the topic.

Roles: The roles can be based on historic and/or fictional characters, however, the information on the character requires considerable “fleshing out” and should not be limited to the name of the character. The allocation of roles is a crucial decision which impacts not only on the learning environment but also on the flow of communication. The size of the role-play should not exceed 8 to 12 students.

Tasks: The tasks need to be clearly defined, open and should encourage communication. Depending on the student group a task might vary in its level of complexity. With regard to the
assessment, the tasks and their outcomes need to be linked to the unit outcomes and marking guidelines need to be clear.

**Communication:** The communication process can include online and, if necessary, face-to-face communication, although there is a chance that face-to-face communication might corrupt the aim of a creating a safer environment. Within the role-play the administrator needs to decide which characters at what stage are allowed to communicate with each other. Furthermore, rules about appropriate behaviour need to be established which refer to the content and conditions of the communication, e.g. time to respond to messages, register of language, etc.

**Technical requirements:** An online platform such as WebCT, blackboard or a special program eg. Simulationbuilder is ideal to run an online role-play at UWA. Strong support by IT-staff is recommended during all phases of this model.

**Phases:** The ideal role-play consists of three phases (introduction, gaming, debrief & reflection/evaluation). The introduction informs students about outcomes, tasks as well as assessment criteria and procedures. Initial training on the user interface is essential for the success of the role-play. The debriefing phase enables students to farewell their character & reflect on their activity in the role-play as well as to evaluate their learning experience.

**Assessments:** With regard to fair assessments, interdependency is to be taken into account, as the completion of tasks often relies on the response of other participants. Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative assessment tools should be in place, eg. number of logins, number of responses to communication as well as qualitative evaluation of the language and content of the communication (correctness of language and cultural knowledge) and general communication skills (request for clarification).

**Support:** The language tutor must contribute to each stage of the model, from design to evaluation. During the implementation process the tutor’s activity and involvement in the role-play seem to be essential to its success. Options range from being a silent observer, language marker or administrator to actively playing one or more roles.

**Face-to-face:** At each stage of the role-play a blended model with the inclusion of face-to-face communication is optional, but might compromise the anonymity and therefore the benefits of a safer environment
Phase 3: This generic model outlined in Phase 2 was ultimately put to the test, by adapting it for the German context. This resulted in the role-play: *Murder in the High Society*, a role play based on a real murder case in Munich, Germany.

The participating students are all enrolled in GRMN 2203 and 2103, which is the intermediate level, where ex-beginners and post-secondary students join the same unit for the first time. For the ex-beginners this transition process is often associated with a decreasing self-confidence in German and very often students form two groups. Therefore, teambuilding skills, anonymity and asynchronism (time to respond) were essential aspects of this role-play.

For three weeks 22, students acted in two parallel role plays as journalists, fashion designers, asylum seekers, politicians, police investigators, etc. All roles were based on historical or fictional characters and were allocated to the students with consideration to their level of language, but students were not aware of this manipulated allocation process. Using the program Simulationbuilder, students had restricted online access to other students and different task-related bulletin boards such as “underground”, “police station” and “High Society”. In the news section, news about the case and Germany in general was released on a daily basis. Students had to fulfil several tasks, including research, report writing and interaction with other characters in the forum.

The role-play culminated in a fancy dress party to reflect the role play, discover the students behind the roles and to detach themselves from their roles. Students participated in three surveys conducted before, during and after the role-play and were encouraged to provide feedback throughout the semester.

Phase 4: Evaluation

The students responded very positively and their feedback started a reviewing process of the online role-play model, which was developed in Phase 2. Areas of improvement related to the introduction, tasks & feedback. Students suggested instant feedback on assessments to improve language skills, clearer instructions, if possible in English, more information on the assessment process, and showed a preference for historical characters. Although students had a 30 minute introduction to the role play it took them some time to get used to the program.

The students’ improvement in their writing and reading skills in the target language, the new vocabulary and cultural knowledge gained from the role play were assessed in grammar tests and oral exams. An analysis of the written communication in the online role-play indicated that
many students improved their vocabulary and their self-confidence in communicating in German. They used different registers which were very often appropriate to the context. Shyer and weaker students were less reluctant to initiate and participate in communication. There was a tendency for ex-beginners to contribute frequent short postings while post-secondary students wrote longer postings less often.

Students didn’t know the true identity of their partners and there was no indication that the difference in the student cohort played an important role. In the contrary, comments at the face-to-face costume party suggest that the gap between ex-beginners and ex-TEE learners might have closed slightly.

Feedback from language tutors confirmed that the online role-play was highly enjoyable, but at the same time very time consuming, especially when communication slowed and they needed to prompt students.

**Phase 5:** In 2009, the generic model will be further refined & again trialed at the intermediate level, this time in Indonesian and French. A guide to online role-plays will be developed to ease the introduction phase for other unit coordinators. Furthermore, the project outcomes will be presented at the Teaching and Learning Conference 2009.

![At the costume party: Students’ interpretation of the murder case](image-url)
Planning
Outcomes, setting, roles, tasks, communication, IT-Support, role play phases, assessments, role of language tutor, level of online activity

Implementation
• Introduction
• Gaming
• Debriefing
⇒ Supervision of communication
⇒ Correction of messages
⇒ Assessments
⇒ News Input

Evaluation
• Student feedback
• Assessment feedback
• Improvement of language skills
• Feedback language tutor, administrator and IT