Global simulations in business French teaching and learning

Ruxandra Petrovici*

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, 11 Carol I Blvd., Iasi, Romania.

Abstract
Originally designed for the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), global simulations have been rapidly adopted by teachers of French as a Second Language (FSL), French as a Mother Tongue (FMT) and French for Specific Purposes (FSP). This approach can be successfully used with learners of all age groups, from the beginner to the advanced level. In this paper we will present several thematic places and the way in which the global simulations approach can be used in teaching Master’s students from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration within “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

Keywords: French for Specific Purposes; teaching-learning methods; professional roles; role play; simulations

1. General aspects

"A global simulation is a script or a scenario framework which allows a group of learners [...] to create a universe of reference [...], to animate it with characters interacting with each other and to simulate language functions, which are needed within this framework, which is at the same time a thematic place and a universe of communication.” (Debyser, 1996). It is a teaching-learning method which intends to become “a means of correlating all pre-existing creative activities so that they avoid being a pedagogical index catalogue” (Yaiche, 1996: 12). The method is a further development of the theses of the specialists in language didactics and research of BELC and of its director, Francis Debyser who announced the “death of the textbook” and emphasized the need to be exposed to a communicative environment and to find oneself in a communicative situation as such in order to be able to learn a foreign language. “To educate means to generate changes in a child’s behavior” (Osterrieth, apud Minder, 1999).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40-332-401699
E-mail address: ruxipetrovici@yahoo.com
The new behavior is materialized in achievements, in new and visible actions and in new representations, concepts, of the learner. This new behavior has a noticeable aspect as, for example, a newly acquired word, and a mental aspect, like a new linguistic concept or a new geometrical strategy. Thus, (Minder, 1999) education should be adapted to the initial material and to the final objective and especially, it should allow a progressive path between them. It is an issue of the necessity of transforming something, but also an issue of what one intends to obtain, of the kind of specialist one intends to train. Therefore, the teacher becomes (Minder, 1999) an organizer and a supervisor of the transformation process. Originally designed for the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), global simulations have been rapidly adopted by teachers of French as a Second Language (FSL), French as a Mother Tongue (FMT) and French for Specific Purposes (FSP).

2. Purpose of study

The aim of this study consist in presenting the way in which the global simulations as method approach can be used in teaching Master’s students from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration within „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi to acquire business vocabulary by proving their knowledge and know-how in real situations.

3. Research methodology

First of all, students acquire business vocabulary from Economics and Business textbooks in French which update knowledge they already have from their Economics and Business lectures in Romanian and then they study French communicative methods. Afterwards, Business students must prove their knowledge and know-how in real situations. Although they may have internship experience in Romanian business organizations, they may be unaware of whether they can cope with the demands of an international professional environment, in this case a Francophone one. The global simulations approach allows the teacher of Business French to immerse his/her students in a certain space and environment in which they can assume a certain identity in order to prove that they are able to react according to what they learned in the training sessions, lectures, readings, role-plays of their language class. Adult learners are not easily motivated to take the role of customers, salespeople, negotiators or managers who speak a foreign language and belong to a different culture than their own. Therefore, the Business French teacher must invent thematic places ("lieux-thèmes") that facilitate students’ simulations. Everybody practices global simulations even without being aware of the method. When we have a certain problem, we investigate the depth of the issue to diagnose the situation and find remedies, which implies finding the people, ideas or changes that could lead to the problem’s final resolution. We later imagine our way of acting in those circumstances as well as other people’s response. Therefore, we make a projection of ourselves in the future and we create a new environment in which we, others and even the situation itself have changed. Global simulations may be used in two different teaching-learning instances (Yaiche, 1996: 11): 1. linguistic training in French as a foreign language and in French as a mother tongue and 2. training in human relations, as it stimulates group work abilities, decision making skills and creativity. Initially, only adult trainees could experience the simulation game (Yaiche, 1996: 13). Students were supposed to first become employed before participating. This involvement in work situations was only necessary because global simulations require, first of all, good command of the language in making conversation, as well as the ability to get in touch with a certain reality, or knowledge of certain reference markers which help a person to place himself/herself within various spatial, temporal, social, intercultural, etc., frameworks. Global simulations imply the invention of a thematic place and of fictitious identities. Designing a thematic place means building, reinventing or imagining a background, an island, a building, a company, a village or a city, a neighborhood, a conference venue, it means constructing all the details and then immersing oneself in that space. Yet, one cannot face the new environment using one’s real identity. Participants, therefore, have to invent fictitious identities for themselves. It is not simply about acting in a role, it is rather about assuming that role (Fréchet, 1997: 37-38). We are not ourselves anymore when we assume the role of a professional in a certain field, of a family member, of a friend, of a colleague, of a buyer or a seller, of a patient or a doctor. We can easily play these roles one by one, even if we have to change our gestures, our mimicry, and especially our way of talking and of looking at others, our general behaviour and even our clothes and, in case this is impossible, our attitude at least. Thus, in the same place, wearing
the same outfit, we can act in roles of strength or of submission, of creativity or of implementation. During our French classes while working with the master’s students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, we noticed that, even though the master’s program was a Francophone one and the students were speaking French quite well, due to the fact that they had taken more English classes than French classes both in high-school and during their undergraduate college years, students were far from integrating the Francophone environment and they behaved in an American-like manner in the communicative situations proposed by different French teaching-learning methods for acquiring general French or French for Specific Purposes. Under the circumstances, students asked for permission to choose French names for themselves in order to become integrated in the specific atmosphere. They even wanted to change their gender in the attempt to better understand the French men, since the managers of French companies producing Business French teaching-learning methods were always men, and the French women, since the buyers and sellers of general French methods were women, especially. By employing global simulations in teaching-training, sometimes we have to consider a temporal place, as well. Once we tried to propose to our second-year management students to tell us how they saw themselves 10 years from that moment as if the wake-up call were to take them to a time when they would have to get up and go to work. As teachers, we perform in a chronological, linear time by asking students what they would do “10 years from now” if they graduated from the faculty they study in at the moment, assuming that society does not change and they pursue their career without any deviations. We aim at generating a description of the company they might work for, its location, structure, object of activity, head offices, colleagues, tasks to carry out and the appropriate vocabulary. We envisaged all students would see themselves as future senior managers or bosses. They played the game, but not the expected one. They felt this proposal as a great freedom to escape the present time and the restrictions imposed by their parents or the university. Thus, we had few managers. A young man wanted to become a doorman, he did not care where; he did not want to become a great professional or earn a lot of money. He wanted to live a quiet life, earn a little money to travel and read. He wanted to feel at ease and free. A girl wanted to start up a small cacti greenhouse and, even though she did not want any riches, she said she loved flowers and would be willing to do what she loved for free. Another girl wanted to become an accountant. She loved working with figures and aimed at bringing them to life so as to speak to her in her solitude. We also realized that imagination cannot be controlled, contained or manipulated. There is always room for the unexpected as far as thematic place-theme-time-roles are concerned. But this would be interesting to perform as controlled simulation. One of the most employed themes in the teaching-training of Business French is the company. Corinne Bombardieri, Philippe Brochard and Jean-Baptiste Henry’s book (Hachette, 1996) approaches the company by means of global simulations in 5 chapters: Prologue: Qu’est-ce qu’une entreprise ? (Prologue: What Is a Company?); 1. Planter le décor (Setting the Background); 2. Inventer les personnages (Inventing the Characters); 3. Faire vivre l’entreprise et Epilogue: Le bilan de l’entreprise (Bringing the Company to Life and Epilogue: The Company’s Balance). Starting from this work, we have already envisaged certain situations of business communication and simulated them with our Romanian Business students. Since we are working with students who are not native French speakers, we cannot approach this matter directly. First of all, they have to become familiar with French companies, the objects of activity preferred by the French, to feel the peculiarities of French companies as compared to American or African ones or a multinational in which a mixture of types co-exists. We may use authentic material from French or Francophone reviews of the field or Business French textbooks on various business entities. Also, students could think of a certain “plan” of a company in general and of a French one, in particular: history of the company, the first product manufactured which remains the main product in most cases, the products developed after the company’s modernization, partners, or further of the changes in the company, human and material resources used at the beginning of their evolution and finally, the consumers targeted by the company. After having become familiar with the structure and the evolution of a company and the various fields of activity and after having put together the knowledge acquired from their Business and Economics courses, French documents and after having envisaged the fields of activity that could lead to the formation of a company, students will be able to “set the background”. The authors of L’entreprise (The Company) distinguish 4 stages: 1. What is Your Project to Start Up a Company? 2. Where Can You Implement It? 4. Founding a Company and 5. Set-up of the Company. The most difficult aspect is choosing the field of activity. In Economics textbooks, the French recommend that the first stage of company formation be the know-how of one’s profession. But the profession of economist is a coordinator’s and a supervisor’s one, and not a profession in itself in the classic
sense of the term. Fortunately, at master level there are graduates from different faculties, some of them coming from families who run their own businesses. Thus, first of all we could ask our students to surf the internet for French companies and make a presentation of the company chosen to their colleagues. This is meant to help them to become familiar with a field of activity they want to get involved in, be it real or imaginary, pragmatic or futuristic. Also, this is an occasion for them to enrich their vocabulary in a certain field and if the topic is worthy of attention, they could also ask their parents or friends for further information. To help them choose a certain product to manufacture or sell via one’s own company, the teacher could ask students to think of a supermarket where they can buy what they want, what they need or what is on sale. It would be funny for them not to have a budget allocated for this and to be asked to throw away what they don’t need or don’t really like. If they have already chosen a product they intend to manufacture in their own company, they are likely to find partners among their colleagues according to their knowledge, know-how, personality and friendship relations. They may also find out that their friends do not have the same taste, interests and understanding of life; therefore, they may be forced to refresh the list of business partners and not mix business with pleasure and leisure. After having chosen a field of activity, an initial product, partners, to choose a legal form for the company is a challenge as they have to invest money or other movable or immovable assets they can think of. To assess the company’s chances of success, students have to draft a questionnaire on their main product and think of a way to build consumer goodwill. The third chapter of The Company introduces to us characters, that is an organigram, holidays, candidates, in general and successful candidates, in particular. Ever since their first or second year of studies, students learn how to make a CV and a cover letter, be it in their mother tongue or a foreign language. They learn how to observe the specifications of a European CV and cover letter, they know how to distinguish themselves from other candidates.

4. Findings

We have noticed that they do not know how their application is seen by a potential employer, which makes it even difficult for them to assess others, in their turn. A useful exercise would be the “submission” of their application to a certain position available based on the organogram of the envisaged company, to a colleague with a pseudonym. Thus, they will first play the role of the candidate, then of the HR manager and last, that of the CEO of their own company. The final chapter, before the prologue, by Corinne Bombardieri, Philippe Brochard and Jean-Baptiste Henry, authors of L’entreprise, Faire vivre l’entreprise (The Company, Running the Company) proposes to us the following sub-chapters: 1. Vendre (Selling); 2. Faits, stratégies et actions (Facts, Strategies and Actions); 3. Histoire d’une journée ordinaire (History of an Ordinary Day) and 4. La vie sociale dans l’entreprise (Social Life in the Company). First of all, we could ask our Romanian students to analyze the product that is either the one they had in mind or another one available on the market; this involves the emphasis on the strengths and weaknesses of a certain product. We can start with a simple product, a bottle of water, a notebook or a pen and end with something much more complicated such as a PC or a car. Generally speaking, they love this type of analysis as they have already bought a certain product and if they believe it is a good product, they imagine themselves to be the sellers of the respective product. Moreover, apart from selling and buying, they would be more than happy to provide details that the French teacher is likely to ignore, thus making proof of their professionalism and competitiveness with their colleagues, notably the ones specializing in marketing. They would form a team to promote the product so it would be easy to ask them to “prepare” a promotional campaign. Global simulations are profitable and can be used in the classroom where students can see their dreams come true, explore and implement the ideas they have reflected on and wondered what the opinion of others might be. Of interest to us is the approach of a matter by students coming from different cultures and the reactions of others, mainly Romanians. Moldavian students who are very respectful, Congolese students who never arrive to class on time, Vietnamese students who are always ready to play by the rules of society, Arabic students who know how to negotiate and merchandise, Erasmus students who lived in France or Italy long enough so as not to care if they are thought to be arrogant, can all play different roles in an international company.
5. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this study consist in presenting the way in which the global simulations as method approach can be used in teaching Master’s students from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration within “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi to acquire business vocabulary by proving their knowledge and know-how in real situations. Originally designed for the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), global simulations have been rapidly adopted by teachers of French as a Second Language (FSL), French as a Mother Tongue (FMT) and French for Specific Purposes (FSP). This method is part of the new didactics which places the process of learning at the top of the teacher’s priority list. The learner-centred approach (Perrenoud, apud Minster, 1999) has certain specific features such as: the main focus on the student as an active subject of his/her own learning process, rather than on the teacher as a channel for knowledge, the tendency to eliminate the separation of study subjects, to encourage global and functional competencies as opposed to notional acquisitions and fragmented knowledge, the desire to offer to the school experience an opening towards life, the aspiration to integrate school learning among the experiences of daily life and of professional life, the respect for the diversity of personalities and cultures. The method also has some specific tasks: not all of the students work on the same activity at the same time, the tasks are associated to certain occasions or projects and correspond to a specific purpose rather than facilitating easy control of the teacher, they are open-ended, do not imply a unique solution, they are designed progressively together with the students, they require verbal resolution, without the obsession of writing. Practiced intuitively by all teachers at the beginning, global simulations may be designed and adapted according to the concepts to be taught, the situation of communication and the target audience, so as to help students understand a problem, a culture, a way to act and react accordingly, from the inside.

References