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ADAPTING INTERACTIVE COMPUTER SIMULATIONS FOR CONTENT BASED ESL INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Interactive computer simulations are routinely used in Business classes to provide an Experiential atmosphere in which business majors can apply business textbook concepts in a realistic, computer generated marketplace. Current language acquisition theory posits that a second language will be learned quicker and more proficiently when the learner is interested in the target language, the language is learned in a realistic context, and the language is appropriate to that context. This demonstration will focus on two adaptations of an existing business simulation. The simulation provides the realistic context, high interest level for the students, and the adaptations provide the appropriate language.

RATIONALE

Currently, content based ESL classes are widely used for three reasons. First, language acquisition theory holds that a second language learner who is interested in the content and usefulness of the target language will be more effectively engaged in the language learning process. If we like the topic, we more readily learn that subject matter; language learning is no different. Thus, it generally holds true that a person in a foreign culture is highly motivated to learn the new language, especially when it pertains to food, toilets, safety, etc. (survival language). However, once past survival language learning, much traditional language learning has been dreary memorization of vocabulary and the parsing of verbs. Content based ESL instruction attempts to provide topics that pique the students' interests. A business major should be more interested to learn the L2 (second language) in a business class than a history class in the L2. Content based ESL instruction seeks to provide classes in the L2 that are interesting to the language learner and thereby enhance the learning process. Indeed, "Business English" texts and classes abound in Intensive English Programs.

The second reason content based ESL instruction is effective is that the language learned in the content based classroom is actually useful to the learner who chose the class due to its content. In short, the L2 learner in a Business English class is confident that the language they are learning will *be useful* to them to communicate with business people. The third reason content based ESL instruction is increasingly used for second language learning is that the context in which the learning takes place can be more realistic, thereby "immersing" the language learner in the target language's culture and context. Everyone who has learned an L2 can remember role-plays where a dialogue is used for teaching common introductions, making small talk, and parting. In the classroom, pairs of people must "perform" these dialogues together, and the context is realistic because two people actually interact. However, when two students practice together, they know that they aren't speaking to real "native" speakers and a credibility gap exists because some of the seriousness of actually having to speak to another person in the L2 is lost due to the lack of a realistic context. ESL teachers try to create a classroom as culturally realistic as possible so that the language learners feel immersed in the culture where they will actually speak this L2. In a Business English class, students typically read case histories, discuss business principles and practices, learn business memos, greetings, etc. Teachers schedule field trips, and make mock "board meetings" and "social gatherings" where the students must practice their new language skills. A problem in the Business English classroom occurs when students must "role-play" a CEO in a meeting with regional managers. Students know they aren't CEO's and its difficult to create the context whereby a student will take such a role-play seriously. This is the point where a dynamic business simulation can be used to create the realistic context for a content based Business English classroom.

Why adapt a business simulation for language instruction?

Flight simulators have been used to train military personnel for years with the loss of life and planes minimized. Similarly, business simulations can create, for example, the competitive environment necessary to teach and apply marketing principles without risking millions of dollars. There also exists a “business culture.” Business has its own jargon, protocols, principles, theories, heroes, traditions, and sub-cultures. “Business English” is, to some degree, “business culture specific.” A business simulation can therefore be used to teach real English used by business people.

Teaching “Business English” in a simulated “business culture”

Businesses have learned that the use “American messages” to market American products to non-Americans often doesn’t work. Likewise, the student who takes a Business English class will have to adjust the focus of their cultural “glasses” in order to understand how to market products in America, manage American workers, and conduct business with Americans.

A business simulation provides the experiential “business culture” for a classroom. English learners are immersed, via the simulation, in a business environment/culture and forced to use English to ensure their “company’s” success. Experience has born out that English language students have no less passion for the “bottom line” than American students do, and they are willing to learn the English necessary to be successful.

Two necessary adaptations

One usual exercise for beginning a business simulation is where each team forms a company and chooses a company name, logo, and motto. Non-native English language speakers often choose odd names, logos, and mottoes. Hence, the students must take their “brainstormed” list of names, logos, and mottoes and survey Americans opinions about which of their choices is the best for their newly formed American company. An assessment tool with appropriate vocabulary (“creativity”, “catchy motto” etc.) and a Likert scale are used to measure their effective use of English. A second “traditional” activity in business simulations is filming a “TV

commercial.” The students must act, speak, and produce an effective “TV commercial.” An adapted assessment tool has been developed to measure the students’ effective use of English for marketing their “product” to American consumers.

Demonstration

This demonstration allows participants to use the adapted assessment tools to evaluate actual ESL students’ commercials and “company names.”