Chapter 28
Designing, Developing and Evaluating Professional Language and Intercultural Competencies with Phone Simulations

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ABSTRACT

With the development of call centers to handle customer services, many tour operators have adopted the technique of recruitment by simulation where the candidates are judged on their ability to respond to working scenarios. To facilitate the school-to-work transition, we sought to increase the learners' exposure to professional tasks and to challenge their communication skills in real situations. This chapter specifically relates to the design, implementation and assessment of a phone conversation simulation introduced in the evaluation scheme within the French for Tourism and Hospitality course. The 22 participants were Malaysian learners majoring in French. The analysis of examination results, phone conversation recordings as well as surveys on the learners' perceptions of the new evaluation format provided a complete feedback on the experience. This chapter aims to present practitioners with a reference guide with step by step explanations and solutions easily transferable to any course with a communication component.

INTRODUCTION

This simulation was designed for learners majoring in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in a Bachelor of Arts at a Malaysian public university. In this program, the learners join as true beginners and graduate three years later. The intensive language program is divided in two phases with the learners attending general French courses for the first year before being progressively exposed to content and specialty courses during the remaining two years. The learners also add a minor subject to their major when they reach their second year. The list of choices includes Communication, Economy, English, Hospitality and Management. The learners mostly choose between Hospitality and Management.

According to Chew and Siow (2009), in Malaysia, the demand for higher education concerns mainly the fields of business (23.9%), engineering (18.9%), humanities (14%) and social sciences (10.7%). However, these percentages vary according to the gender and ethnicity of the learners. For women, the statistics are respectively 25.3% for business and humanities and only 9.2% for social sciences. The Chinese are particularly interested in business (34.1%), engineering (20.3%), humanities (12.35) and lastly in social sciences (5.6%).

However, our university uses the services of a clearing agency which appoints learners to the various programs according to their results to secondary examinations. In fact, in most cases, the learners did not choose to learn French and are therefore disheartened from the beginning. Consequently, many of them regard their minor subjects as an opportunity to study what they consider as a more practical subject. Only two learners from the 22 participants of this case study had chosen French as a first choice and two as a second choice.

In the French program, most learners are Malaysian Chinese women. Their lack of motivation probably matches their disappointment as well as their parents'. According to the same authors, the

relatives are the main sponsors in higher education. This explains further the parents' frustration when their children end up studying French.

Once the learners graduate, most of them enter the job market. Informal discussions with four consecutive batches of final year learners revealed that the majority of them were anxious to leave the campus. They grieved that they lacked confidence and felt unprepared. They had no career prospects and added that their relatives still questioned the usefulness of learning French. These findings concur with the correlation established by Cheng, Chong and Wong (1999) about the learners' low self-esteem and their relatives' high expectations. Access to higher education is seen as a gateway to a brighter future. They carry the hopes of their parents and fear that they might disappoint them.

These negative thoughts needed to be addressed in order to foster motivation and assurance among learners. If learners with excellent grades did not believe in themselves, the evaluation process had to be re-examined to equip the learners with the relevant competencies and benchmarks to facilitate their professional insertion. We believed that real-world and engaged-learning pedagogies had the potential to assist the learners in developing life-long learning skills and autonomy. Kuppusamy, Nagaraj, and Lee (2008) demonstrated that Malaysian students needed to be reassured regarding their professional competencies in order to be realistic about their potentials. These authors recommended exposing the learners to information pertaining to career prospects and professional skills for them to realize their capabilities. Syamala, Chew, Lee and Rahimah (2009) concluded on the trends brought by globalization, particularly to the new goals ahead for Malaysian companies in terms of customer services and relations. In line with government policies, the competencies highlighted were greater thinking, creative and flexible skills.

Simulation learning had the potential to bring forward these skills while exposing the learners to authenticity. In the design of real-world activi-

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