

Simulations and Role Plays for Industry-Specific Situations

**Anthony Crooks
International University of Japan**

Research Proposal

The English Language Program (ELP) at the International University of Japan (IUJ) has been involved in the use of simulations and role plays with its students for most of its history (Modica, 1999). These have primarily been a feature of the ELP's Intensive English Program (IEP), and currently (i.e. 2011) involves IEP participants in simulations at the end of the IEP in which they engage in 'bidding' presentations to companies, companies looking to address imagined situations in workplaces that involve cross-cultural issues. For example, one simulation involves a Japanese company manager struggling with the mores and norms of his local colleagues and workers employed in a Japanese company based in Indonesia.

These somewhat generic simulations have suited their purposes well – brought the speaking and listening component of the IEP to a challenging and motivating conclusion, building on the bonds that have formed amongst the multi-national students that comprise each class. The mornings of the final two days of the IEP are a crescendo of activity as students, dressed in business suits, present to potential clients in their audience. They have had a week to design, prepare, and rehearse their presentations, and to ready themselves for the challenges that await – and are also aware that there are *other* groups of students acting in teams as individual companies who are also 'bidding' for the right to be hired act as 'cross cultural consultants' for the company in question.

However, in recent years IUJ has been increasing inviting interest of companies throughout Japan to take advantage of its English-medium curriculum and campus, and draw on both the content offered in English offered by professors in the Graduate School of Management and Graduate School of International Relations, but in particular from the services offered by the ELP. In past years, the ELP has focused its attention in regular course time on developing and enhancing the *academic* language skills of students, especially given the challenges posed by the report and thesis writing that must be done in these students' content courses. In fact, further requests have been made of the ELP beyond regular course time to work with students who have been identified as struggling with the completion of their final pieces often writing (usually theses) in order for them to graduate from their Masters-level program.

At the same time, there has also been an increase in what are referred to as ‘non-degree programs’ (NDPs) that bring students to campus for short periods (one to two weeks) where they have intensive professional development and ‘refresher’ courses. IUJ is increasingly being seen by many Japanese employers as an ideal location for such activities due to the university’s multi-national make-up, its English-medium environment, its location – it provides their aforementioned qualities and while it is relatively isolated (with few distractions and putting the students in a situation where there are ample opportunities to communicate in English) it is also less than two hours from Tokyo by *shinkansen*. It serves as an ideal ‘learning camp’ from which the students can depart on a Friday evening and be in their Kanto homes later that evening.

Although IUJ has started off with small, short-term courses, more companies are wishing to send their employees to us for longer periods of time, especially companies that are expanding into other parts of the world, and see the advantage of their employees having increased skills in English, skills that they may have not drawn upon since their early university years. These are individuals who may have never had the chance to speak with peers in English, or be in an environment where English is the common medium of communication.

Companies are asking IUJ to not just provide courses in English akin to those they would have in an Intensive English Program abroad, but to construct courses which contain features specific to their industry. As the general focus of the ELP, as noted before, has been on *academic* English, the call for high quality *industry-specific* English provides even more challenges, especially when these courses are desired at times when the ELP is engaged in purely *academic* English. However, it is the shaping of courses to clients’ needs – clients who are sometimes not entirely clear on what they exactly want – that present even more challenges.

Recently, a major Japanese retailer that is not simply extending itself abroad but also taking English on as its language of operation – even in Japan – has called upon IUJ to prepare classes for employees who will be sent abroad as store managers, and who will need sufficient English communicative skills to interact with their local employees. This is of significant need due to the reputation and very specific style the retailer presents to its customers. Its brand – from its products to its stores to its sales assistants to its service – have garnered praise and been the cornerstone of their success. This success, it is felt, will continue aboard only if the local staff in these overseas branches are keenly aware of and adhere to the policies and guidelines laid out for Japanese employees. This goes beyond reading a

translated manual – a Japanese store manager must be able to train, mentor, and supervise their staff in these foreign locations. The only way that will be accomplished, it is felt, is through increasing the English of the Japanese so-to-be store-manager of foreign branches.

As this company is a retailer it was found that the generic business texts available and on the market did not have any specific retail focus – there were vocational texts covering travel and tourism, hospitality, and general office life, nothing was available for us to draw upon that focused on retailing, especially the specific retailing area this particular company dealt with. It was felt that we (IUJ's ELP) would literally have to start from scratch. And to do that English translations of the company's manuals would be needed to draw upon.

These company-produced materials were not only needed due to dearth of retailing materials on the market, the company has very specific 'ways' of doing things, ways that can be learned to a certain extent by an inspection of a store and its staff, but far more from the literature it produces for its employees. It is within this literature that emerge the intricacies of 'the way' everything – from greetings to staff body positioning to stock storage, arrangement and display amongst a host of other qualities – needed to be done.

And by reading these materials it became clear that the simulations and role plays that feature so strongly in IUJ's IEP must become the core of the company's learning experience whilst at IUJ. They will be given time to enhance their English in more formal, traditional ways, via the use of a generic textbook, but the second half of the day will deal exclusively with role plays and simulations in which the company participants will interact with multi-national/cultural/lingual IUJ student facilitators, working through and discussing scenarios that it will be expected the store managers will experience in their future placements (and can be seen clearly in the company's manuals). The role plays and simulations will be video recorded for reflection by the store managers outside of class and will serve as source materials for discussions in the classroom – replays to see what went right and wrong in terms of linguistic and para-linguistic features, cross-cultural understanding, and general 'communicative competence'.

As this month (August, 2011) sees the first of programs taking place at IUJ for this company, we are eager to experiment with what we believe will be successful approaches. However, the experience in itself is very much along the lines of Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Cohen, L.; Manion, L; Morrison, K. (2000)) in which each lesson will be planned in terms of established principles of role play and simulations in and outside of language learning, the classes executed, followed by examination and considered reflection,

and then redesign and retrial with the then current students, or those who will be assigned to us in the future.

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