

Expédition aux Terres Australes



A Web-based Online Role-play Simulation:
the enhancement of language acquisition
through social interaction

by

Andrée Vanda Hartley

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**A report of an investigation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree of Masters of Education at
Murdoch University**

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content, work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Andrée Vanda Barbara Hartley

Signed: _____

Date: 12th November, 2004

ABSTRACT

This research project investigates to what extent a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning online can enhance the use of language acquisition for learners of foreign languages. I designed an online role-play simulation in which the students sailed on the expedition of Nicolas Baudin to Australia and took different authentic roles on a simulated voyage. All communication was conducted in the French language, thus enabling the students to interact in realistic conversations, relevant to this historic event. Being in a third year TAFE French class, the students had already been exposed to sound grounding in grammar, relevant vocabulary, and use of colloquial and idiomatic expressions, and thus they had acquired a reasonably high level of proficiency in the language.

The study was conducted over a four-week period in which I examined the intense interaction between the participants, while fulfilling the role of facilitator/moderator. In this role, I gave clear guidelines as to what was expected from the participants; provided the students with their identity which was unknown to the other participants during the simulation; created incidents through a weekly “Course of Events” announcement; answered all questions within 12 – 24 hours; encouraged engagement within the learning community; made occasional suggestions if the characters seemed uncertain of what to do next; and, above all, endeavoured to create a non-threatening, friendly online environment for the students.

After the four-week online role-play simulation, the participants met for a debriefing session in which they revealed their identities and discussed any issues, in particular technical issues, that had emerged. This provided an opportunity for the participants to disengage from the virtual world in which they have been immersed for four weeks as well as an opportunity to reflect upon their personal learning.

A qualitative methodology, drawing on interpretive research, was employed to analyse the data. Student pre- and post-questionnaires, online contributions by the students and the debriefing discussion were used as the major sources of data collection.

Most of the students took up the challenge of interacting online through asynchronous and synchronous communication. The study focused on how the use of a social constructivist epistemology could enhance language acquisition for learners of foreign languages and also analysed to what extent did the students’ participation in a web-based online role-play simulation affect their communication skills and fluency in the second language.

The findings provided me with guidance for future implementation of online role-play simulations in which I would ensure that all students have the basic computer skills and necessary access to internet in order to participate fully in the simulation. Nevertheless, this study demonstrated many benefits to the language enhancement of the participants and will become a regular activity as it permits students to use their conversational skills in a “real-life” virtual learning community.

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LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1: Modes of Interaction in Distance Education from Anderson and Garrison.
- Figure 2: The Home Page was designed to suit the era.
- Figure 3: Distribution of students by gender and age group.
- Figure 4: Highest level of education reached by each student.
- Figure 5: Students' own perception of their computer literacy.
- Figure 6: Number of postings read and unread by each character in group 1.
- Figure 7: Number of postings read and unread by each character in group 2.
- Figure 8: Number of postings sent by each character in Groups 1 and 2.
- Figure 9: Language Change in relation to Computer Competence after participation in online RPS.

LIST OF TABLES

- Table 1: Personal feelings of Group 1 students prior to participation in the role play.
- Table 2: Emails received and sent between students
- Table 3: Students' perception of their own learning during the role play.
- Table 4: Students' perception of their interactions with other characters.
- Table 5: Students' perception of their interface with the technology.
- Table 6: Students' interaction with the content.
- Table 7: Students' interaction with the moderator.
- Table 8: Results of Oral Assessments prior to and after RPS

CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER 1: Reliving History through E-Learning.....	1
Expédition aux Terres Australes.....	2
The Aim of the Role-play Simulation.....	4
The Aim of the Study.....	5
The Research Questions.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Methodology.....	7
Qualitative methodology.....	7
Data Collection.....	7
Data Analysis.....	9
Overview of Chapters.....	9
Ethical Considerations.....	10
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review.....	11
Social constructivism.....	11
Social Interaction and Collaboration.....	13
Online learning.....	15
Role-play simulation.....	19
Foreign language acquisition.....	22
CHAPTER 3: Methodology & Content of the Study.....	26
Components of the Role-Play.....	28
The storyline.....	29
The vehicle.....	29
The characters.....	30
The events.....	32
The participants.....	34
Site design.....	34
The role-play.....	38
Guidelines.....	39
Key Elements of the Role-Play.....	42
Moderation.....	44
CHAPTER 4: Research Content.....	47
Organisation of the Role-play Simulation.....	47
Group One.....	47
Week One.....	48
Week Two.....	54
Week Three.....	55
Week Four.....	60
The End of the Voyage approaches.....	61
Group Two.....	63
Week One.....	63
Week Two.....	64
Week Three.....	66
Week Four.....	71
The end of the voyage approaches.....	72
CHAPTER 5: Data Analysis.....	74
Strategies for Observation.....	74
Interpretive Analysis.....	75
Questionnaire 1.....	75
The Demographics.....	75
On-site activity.....	82
Questionnaire 2.....	86
French Language Skills.....	87
Interaction with other characters.....	88
The technology.....	89

The content	90
The moderator.....	92
What the students like most:	94
What the students liked least:	94
Reflective thinking.....	96
Debriefing.....	101
Assessment and Evaluation	103
CHAPTER 6: Summary and Conclusion.....	108
Limitations of the study and Implications for the Future.....	113
The role-play simulation	113
Moderation.....	113
Lessons to be learnt.....	114
Limitations to participation in the role-play	115
Possible Applications of the Findings.....	116
The future of online role-play simulation in foreign language learning	116
A final thought.....	117
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	118
APPENDICES	127