The Model United Nations: A Four-skills, Critical Thinking, Task-Oriented Language Learning Experience

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Key Words: Model United Nations, simulation, education

Introduction

It is my privilege in this article to describe an energizing and effective multi-purpose educational tool: a simulation of a United Nations session. I will begin by briefly describing the characteristics and educational advantages of simulations in general. Next, I will sketch in the background of the Model United Nations (M.U.N.), and follow by describing all its component parts. Then I will trace an important trend in Second Language Acquisition which lends support to M.U.N.'s educational value, and demonstrate some of this educational activity's specific language-learning strengths. Following this, I will suggest how M.U.N. can help those Japanese students, whose oral English is already strong enough to cope with the simulation in the first place, be more effective in extra-Japanese settings through broadening their cultural base. Finally, I'll conclude with some observations on M.U.N.'s ultimate worth.

Simulations

What, precisely, are simulations? Definitions vary; Sharon Reimel de Carrasquel's careful synthesis is that simulations are "dynamic representations in a structured environment in which real-life or hypothetical components can be substituted or exchanged for other

Received May 19, 1997

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elements" (Reimel, 1995 p.113). Simulations can be simplified or made more complex, she continues, depending on the needs of the participants. They can also be tailored to time constraints. They are satisfying intellectually because they "... develop sequentially, thus emphasizing coherence and logic" (*ibid*, p.114). Therefore, as Reimel points out, they are highly appropriate for adult students. I would extend this to include students from the mid-teens on up. The excitement generated by simulations is explained by Jones (1982: in Reimel, p.114) when he states that "almost all simulations involve a substantial amount of interaction between the participants, and interaction involves language--the spoken word, the written word, or both." Jones concludes with a very important point: "of all the reasons for using simulations in language teaching, motivation is one of the most important" (*ibid*, p.115).

Background and Structure of the Model United Nations

Student motivation is indeed typically very high in the educational simulation known as The Model United Nations, which was begun in schools in the early 1950s to spread awareness of a relatively new international forum: the United Nations itself in New York. M.U.N.s now take place annually in many countries around the world. They are, for example, a popular activity across the United States, where approximately 100 major annual conferences involving over 50,000 high school and college students are held on the national, regional, and local levels each year. World-wide, M.U.N.s are generally conducted in English. However, there is no requirement against the use of other languages, which are indeed made use of.

The Model United Nations introduces students to international relations and global diplomacy through giving them the roles of national delegates in sessions of potentially all six of the principal U.N. organs, depending on the number of participants involved. The General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council are the bodies most frequently simulated, although the

International Court of Justice, the Trusteeship Council, and the Secretariat may also be modeled. In addition to taking the roles of delegates, participating students embody all other U.N. personnel from Secretary General and President of the General Assembly to diplomatic messengers and building guards. They can even work as journalists producing a daily newsletter covering conference developments.

Student delegates study international issues based on the annual agenda of the real U.N. in New York as well as their particular assigned nations' perspectives on those issues. During the actual conferences, organizers sometimes mandate that participating school faculty sponsors be strictly prohibited (once the delegate preparation phase is over) from interfering with their student delegates in any way. As a result, M.U.N. students "learn by doing" in accordance with the proverb: "When I hear it, I forget it. When I see it, I remember it. When I do it, I understand it." Students typically also manage many of the preparations (such as registration, transportation, and housing) entailed in organizing a conference, which can become worthy responsibility-building and educational activities in themselves, especially at the international level.

The grand finale of the Model United Nations at the high school level is held early each year in the Netherlands at the Hague. Some 5,000 students take part; a single assigned country may be represented by 20 or more delegates. At the college level, the oldest and most prestigious conference is organized by Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts every February. In 1997, which marked its 43rd consecutive year, the Harvard National Model United Nations (HNMUN) featured nearly 2,000 students. They hailed predominantly from American institutions, but also from three other continents in a growing trend of international participation. This past February, for example, the author had the privilege of accompanying 16 students from Simon Bolivar University in Caracas, Venezuela (that institution's first year of participation) to HNMUN.[1]

How do students become involved in the intriguing, multi-dimensional

Model United Nations activity? This varies from school to school. M.U.N. participation can be organized as an extra-curricular activity, or form part of an international relations course or series of courses. Tie-ins with a range of disciplines within a given educational institution, depending on the topic areas for a given year, are also possible and recommended. For example, a topic dealing with the worldwide depletion of fish stocks would logically have student delegates seeking out the biology, oceanography, economics, and international law instructors in their schools.

Now let us look at how M.U.N. at the high school level in South America and the Caribbean is organized so that it may serve as a rough model for a new program elsewhere, regardless of age level. Organizers should first obtain a thorough understanding of the United Nations Charter and debate procedures. Then they should establish the activity within their own school, developing a base of competent student-delegates. With this hard-won experience, organizers are ready to invite other institutions to an annual conference, assisting those schools by sending their participating students manuals covering all facets of the activity. Next, and far in advance of the final conference, organizers must select student officers. These individuals --the Secretary-General, President of the General Assembly, President of the Security Council, and Deputy Officers as needed depending on the size of the conference--are crucial to the success of the activity. They must be highly responsible, emotionally mature, and have superior organizational ability, for they will come under considerable pressure of various kinds in the months ahead. (At the same time, they are likely to derive tremendous benefits in personal development and self-confidence.) The faculty organizers from the sponsoring school should solicit recommendations for prospective student officers from their colleagues in other schools. However, they should not be reluctant to choose the officers from their own schools, for they will know such students well and can monitor their pre-conference organizational work firsthand.

Let me now turn to the responsibilities of the delegates. Their first stage of preparation is to research the annual issues sent out by the sponsoring school of the M.U.N. conference. For a recent year these were, e.g., as follows: the question of civil and political rights; international trafficking and transfer of weapons of mass destruction; the responsibilities of multinational corporations in foreign countries; the role of the U.N. in the 2lst Century; the establishment of a standing U.N. military force; the maintenance of international peace and security; the elimination of terrorism; and the question of increased membership in the Security Council. Student delegates conduct their research on such annual issues through a variety of means including extensive reading, monitoring of current events, and writing the United Nations itself for past resolutions and other materials. Most emphatically, the Internet has become a key research aid. The various search engines (e.g. Yahoo, Infoseek, and Altavista) are all quite useful. The Central Intelligence Agency Fact Book[2] yields abundant information on every country on earth and serves as a good springboard for further research.

The second stage of delegate research begins with the receipt from conference organizers of those nations the students will represent. These countries are generally assigned on a random basis. Decisions are conditioned at the university level by the number of students available to represent nations in the various committees of the United Nations. For example, a major actor on the world stage may require up to 27 delegates, while a small nation of limited international involvement might be represented by as few as six.

In some cases, student preferences for countries are taken into account. In general, however, any participating student should be able to effectively research and represent any nation, much as a well-trained actor can perform creditably in any role. To extend the comparison with the theater, the saying "There are no small parts, only small actors" is especially true of M.U.N. because there are no small parts. There is nothing to prevent a delegate from tiny Monaco,

e.g., from being just as active as a delegate from the huge Russian Federation. Also, the goal of expanding participants' awareness of the world--and comprehending and respecting the different points of view therein--is at odds with student requests to represent their own or similar countries.

Delegates investigate the histories, political structures, geographies, geopolitical situations, economies, natural resources, military capabilities, cultural profiles, established views on world problems, and long-standing fears and hopes of the nations they are to represent. Such research may include writing to nations' permanent missions. Of excellent educational value is personally interviewing diplomatic personnel posted in or near the students' cities.

The third phase of the M.U.N. activity entails the preparation of position papers. These spell out how countries stand on the issues before the U.N., and prepare the ground for the resolution-writing to come. Although a premium is placed on fidelity to their assigned countries' real-world positions, delegates are also permitted creative scope, both at this phase and in the negotiations to come. This is because national stances can and do change, sometimes dramatically, in the real world.

Next comes the moment to write resolutions, the fourth step in the Model United Nations activity. In these, student delegates craft solutions to the issues before the M.U.N. from the perspectives of their individual states. Resolutions must be written in English to the highest formal standards, and precisely follow the official U.N. format.

Fifth, armed with their resolutions, delegates are ready to begin the search for other countries' support. They may choose to fax or e-mail one another even before meeting personally at the M.U.N. Conference. While negotiating--either at long distance or later face to face--they remain mindful of their roles as parts of regional and other blocs. Such affiliations may be accentuated by the specific issues under discussion. For example, Scandinavian delegates might

logically first seek the support of their Nordic neighbors for the purpose of promoting protection of the Arctic ozone layer. Consultations between members of the British Commonwealth, the G7, the European Community, the Association of Southeast Asian nations, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization--depending on the economic or military nature of a given issue--may well take place before presenting a plan of action to other countries. Merging two or more resolutions into one can occur at the pre-conference stage as well as later if various delegates find that they hold similar views.

Another area of delegate preparation is developing public speaking confidence and mastering M.U.N. debate procedures. Weekend afternoon debate practice sessions are useful in this regard, and one full-scale rehearsal in formal attire with all the available student delegates in the area of the conference site is recommended. Students practice with microphones, and various logistical problems can be identified and resolved before the final conference.

At last all delegates arrive for the start of the formal M.U.N. conference. Here in Caracas, the event is kicked off by an "Instructional Panel," in which resident real-world diplomatic personnel give short talks and take questions from student delegates. These panels have the potential to blur the boundary between the genuine and simulated diplomatic worlds. In 1995 in Caracas, the Ambassador from China refused to enter the grounds of the host international school when he saw, from the parking lot, a flag representing Taiwan flying at the same level as those of the many nations represented in the student body. The school authorities decided to lower this flag to prevent the Ambassador's departure. After the Instructional Panel had concluded its session and the Ambassador had left, the flag was raised again. In passing, the following year the Japanese Ambassador argued forcefully for expansion of the Security Council to reflect the present international importance of his country and others.

Following the Instructional Panel, the afternoon and following day bring intensive face-to-face lobbying. Delegates strive to garner as

many co-signatories (and thus guaranteed votes) for their resolutions as possible prior to the General Assembly and Security Council sessions. To get those votes requires understanding their counterparts' concerns, i.e., other national perspectives on the world. As mentioned previously, the delegates often merge two or more resolutions, which they must take to the computer room for redrafting. Faculty intervene only to check for grammar, spelling, and style--once again, the entirety of the intellectual work is left to the students.

The third day of the conference, which now enters its formal debate phase, is inaugurated by a keynote speech, perhaps delivered by a resident diplomat. Thirty-second to one-minute opening speeches by one delegate from each country may follow. In order to save time in the case of a large number of participants, organizers may make such speeches optional. Then the General Assembly, Security Council, and Committee sessions ensue, depending on the particular conference, for the duration of the event.

Two schools of thought exist about awarding best-student and best-delegation awards at the conclusion of a conference. One is that they motivate effort during all stages of the M.U.N. experience. The other maintains that they do not simulate the actual United Nations but instead encourage grandstanding at the expense of quiet, effective diplomacy. M.U.N. organizers seem to split on this issue rather evenly.

Language-Learning Effectiveness

Now that we have seen the outlines of the M.U.N. activity, how does it perform as a foreign language-improvement resource? I believe it to be very effective in this regard, for the reasons which appear below.

To begin with, it requires extensive practice in each of the four language skills. Students read widely in the course of their country and issue research, and must later quickly extract the key ideas of their peers' resolutions. *Writing* is entailed in the preparation of their

own resolutions, in diplomatic notes passed through messengers on the floor of the General Assembly, and in letters to countries' permanent missions as well as the actual U.N. in the search for information. Effective *listening* is vital to the question-and-answer period following the diplomatic corps' presentations on the first day, and of course is central to all practice and conference lobbying and debate sessions. Finally, students get a great deal of *speaking* practice of varying kinds. Public speaking is entailed through making the introductory country speeches and, in the course of debate, through the dual modes of presenting prepared remarks to the General Assembly and putting extemporaneous questions to other speakers having the floor. Private attempts at persuasion also take place prior to and between debate sessions as delegates lobby one or several of their peers. The increased skill levels and self-confidence achieved through this intensive purpose-driven use of oral English could easily enhance many students' subsequent careers.

Pedagogical support for the Model United Nations simulation is readily construable in the literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). A description of communicative competence now follows, and then an examination of M.U.N. in the light of several points made by the linguist H.G. Widdowson.

Communicative competence is associated with a movement in linguistics which considers the meaning of any discrete example of language to be inextricably bound up with its surrounding linguistic and social context. This idea's beginnings can be traced to works (1923, 1935) by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who concluded that accurate translation of primitive languages was only possible through reference to the physical environment of the speakers. This environment necessarily included other people present and those individuals' language choices, nonverbal behavior, and objects in their possession (for example, food, or perhaps a weapon).

From this starting point, Malinowski's student J.R. Firth, an historian turned linguist, extended the pertinence of environment to

all the world's languages. He emphasized not the physical characteristics of an environment, but rather its *textual embrace* of speakers and writers. That is to say, connected discourse and its demands exert a strong "environmental" influence on us just by themselves.

Anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes was the next important figure to study actual (as opposed to idealized) speakers and listeners in the midst of social interaction. He rejected the dominant linguistic research paradigm of the late 60s: Chomskyan analysis of single sentences created by an ideally competent speaker (usually the researcher himself) in isolated quest for the theorized universal grammar underlying all languages. Hymes pointed out that children learn not only *how* (in principle at least) to understand and produce every grammatical sentence in their native languages, they also learn *when* each is socially appropriate. For example, appropriateness in certain settings (such as among one's rebellious teen-age peers) may imply diverging from standard grammaticality.

The British linguist M.A.K. Halliday also moved away from the study of formal structure towards analyzing language according to its social functions from moment to moment. With a given utterance speakers want to describe, agree, attract attention, hide intent, seduce, or pursue a myriad of other purposes. Studying the grammatical structures they use does not help us understand those purposes. Rather, only through evaluating what they say in the context of the particular situations in which they are speaking can we discern their true aims. Again, as with Malinowski and Hymes, we find that language shorn of its specific situational communicative intent hardly seems to be language at all. For many linguists nowadays, communication and social considerations seem to have not just something, but almost everything to do with language use--including its acquisition.

H.G. Widdowson, who has written widely on language as communication and rhetoric, has fashioned one of the strongest theoretical positions in support of a communicative approach not only to language analysis but also to language learning. In Aspects of Language Teaching

(1990), he makes the key assertion that language learning is enhanced by a concurrent discovery of language and the world. That is, language encountered in a meaningful *context* coheres and remains in the mind. M.U.N., as we have seen, fulfills this requirement spectacularly. Investigating the world and using language effectively in the course of doing so comprise the whole of the activity.

The personal experience of many individuals--my own certainly--no doubt supports the conclusion that vital for the self-confidence of language learners is progress not only in the all-too-often artificial conditions of a classroom, but in the real world outside of it. Widdowson (1984) describes classroom-bound, world-isolated language as follows: "The pedagogic presentation of language necessarily involves methodological contrivance which isolates essential features from their natural surroundings. ...It would perhaps be... effective with adult learners... if one acknowledged from the start that language classes were exercises in the theatre of the absurd" (p.14). It is not my intention to represent Widdowson out of context here as saying that classroom study is absurd. However, the M.U.N. experience certainly underlines the point that language is not only a matter of fitting prelearned bits of language into prelearned situations. The activity rescues language learners from the isolation of essential features of language from their natural surroundings by getting them out of class and into intellectual effort, thinking on their feet, and social interaction.

Widdowson (1984) touched on another drawback of the classroom when he referred to the all-too-common pitfall of teaching to the taught. To a certain extent, the teacher-centered classroom is unavoidably a place where material already understood by some is taught too quickly to others, with the result that the latter are likely to become confused and demoralized. Thus teacher-centered classes must waste at least some of the time of both the best and worst students. It is a disheartening dilemma.

M.U.N. offers one good escape from it. As delegates lobby and

debate, they clarify points among themselves only as necessary, never gratuitously. Their final goal is passing resolutions, not teaching language, in the limited time available. In order to be understood and to persuade, the stronger speakers help the weaker ones, thus multiplying the instruclional role of the teacher manyfold. The result is efficient language learning within a given context. And what is the context of M.U.N. ?--the entire world and its gravest problems, an ample space indeed for language-learning purposes.

In addition to the efficient help of the better speakers, weaker ones benefit from the use of *linguistic routines*, or "predictable patterns of language use," as Widdowson (1984) defined this term. In social life these include greetings, solicitous questions, small talk, introductions, and so on. Understanding them helps launch language learners into conversation, and to reorient them when they have lost the thread.

M.U.N. debate and resolution-writing procedures are replete with linguistic routines. These are set down on paper and when learned beforehand, quickly bring weaker speakers to the center of the action. Therefore, such students can participate and improve in English from their first moments in the activity.

Still another way Widdowson helps to establish the language-learning worth of M.U.N. is through his treatment (1990) of what is today called strategic competence. To illustrate, if communicative competence enables us to order a steak prepared as we like it, strategic competence permits us to reestablish understanding with our waiter if for some reason the ordering process breaks down. We might say, "What do you mean by 'medium rare ?'" "Could you please speak more slowly?" "In other words, you're saying that the Chateaubriand is not available on weekends, is that correct?"

Strategic competence is clearly important to successful communication, but Widdowson lamented that as late as 1984 procedures like those above--clarification, repetition, and paraphrasing, respectively--were still absent from language instruction syllabi. Are they taught so much more often today?

Strategic competence has always received heavy emphasis in M.U.N. Time, once again, is of the essence, and much of the discourse is public. Both factors raise the incentive to understand and be understood quickly, sometimes even to avoid a little personal embarrassment. Thus communication repair is frequent and efficient, and strategic competence strengthened.

M.U.N. in the Japanese Context

Following this review of the structure and pedagogical usefulness of M.U.N., I would like to propose how this activity might beneficially stretch, in a cultural way, those Japanese students already sufficiently developed as English speakers to participate in it. The Model United Nations can expand their behavioral and conceptual repertoires by giving them experiences useful for professional and social success with non-Japanese. It does so through helping them to break down *enryo* (Doi, 1973 p.38-39), or polite hesitation. This culturally ingrained behavior, although entirely appropriate and effective in numerous contexts within Japan, is often a disadvantage when dealing with non-Japanese (who, after all, coined the phrase "He who hesitates is lost.") For example, Japanese have at times unintentionally declined invitations from foreigners that they in fact very much welcomed because they thought that three successive urgings would be forthcoming to overcome their own two standard and courteous demurrals. M.U.N., however, encourages *forthrightness* (a trait necessary for persuading other delegates to adopt one's point of view). Forthrightness is useful in general in dealing with foreigners, both inside and outside of Japan, and would help expand the behavioral repertoire of many Japanese.

On the philosophical level, M.U.N. could also help develop what, in Takeo Doi's analysis, does not typically exist in the minds of most Japanese: the concept of the public (Doi 1973, p.43-44), and by logical extension, the world public. Akira Yanabu reinforces the point, noting that the similar word "society" did not even exist in the

Japanese language until only a little over a century ago, when it was coined by Yukichi Fukuzawa in reaction to European influences (Yanabu, 1982). Doi explains that the circles of *ninjo* (or feeling, such as exists in the parent-child relationship) and *giri* (socially contracted obligations) exclude *tanin*, people with whom neither bond is present. Psychologically, then, *tanin* have almost no significance, no reality. Certainly they do not comprise, Doi continues, the public in the way such is felt to exist in, ironically enough, more individualistic countries. Consequently, when forced into contact with people from such countries, it is not surprising that many Japanese, perhaps particularly inexperienced youth, would experience *hitomishiri*, or stranger anxiety.

In this regard, M.U.N. is helpful. It creates a supracultural sense of interrelatedness and confidence in dealing with those not in one's immediate circle of concern. In a shrinking world increasingly bringing people into contact with "the other"--for business, communications, immigration, study, travel, and other reasons--the importance of such self-confidence seems evident.

Of great potential benefit to an M.U.N. conference, especially one organized in Japan, is the only university in the world established by the U.N. itself. United Nations University opened its doors in Tokyo in 1993[3], and the U.N.U. Press[4] has already published an impressive number and variety of books.

The Worth of M.U.N.: Summing Up

Having reviewed the M.U.N. activity's pedagogical basis and relevance to many Japanese students, it is time to conclude with some overall judgments about its worth. M.U.N. contributes to the development of well-rounded, self-confident students, and broadens their career options. It benefits both them and their countries in the ever-more interrelated world community. It is a very powerful tool for understanding various perspectives on some of the most pressing issues of our era; for developing a life-long interest in international

affairs; for acquiring a better understanding of the role of the United Nations in the world community; and for preparing young people for possible careers as internationalists.

More profoundly, M.U.N. is a healthy activity in the spiritual sense. Obliging participants to investigate the gravest of our common problems and to take responsibility for eliminating or controlling them is to insist that doing so is possible. It is an insistence upon an optimistic point of view in a world in which many of us have become resigned to the triumph of the evils of our era. The gift of optimism through the taking up of responsibility is a very precious gift indeed, fostering energy and hope. Placing it in our students' hands deserves our serious consideration.

Notes

1) The reader is encouraged to make contact with the very responsive staff of this event. Write Scott M. Singer, Secretary-General, Harvard National Model United Nations 1998, P.O. Box 22 6, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A. 02238-0226; telephone (617) 495-5828; fax (617) 496-4472; e-mail humun@hcs.harvard.edu; World wide Web http://hcs.harvard.edu/~humun
2) http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications.
3) Readers can contact the university by writing the newsletter *UNUnexions* at the following address: The United Nations University--Public Affairs Section, 53-70, Jingumae 5-chome, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150, Japan. Or they may telephone 81-3-3499-2811, fax 81-3-3499-2828, or e-mail mbox@hq.unu.edu.
4) Write the United Nations University Press at the above address. However, telephone 03-3499-2881, fax 03-3406-7345, or e-mail sales@hq.unu.edu. A World Wide Web page may be visited at http://www.unu.edu.

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