

Simulation a Language Learning Tactic



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What is Simulation? - 1

Simulation is a language learning model which allows students to express themselves to their peers in a group setting, groups comprising usually three or four. It is related to Role Play, but in Simulation students retain their own personas and are not required to pretend to be someone else.

In Role Play one student might be told that she is a supermarket checkout assistant whilst another is a customer. Students might also be given fairly tight guidelines outlining the nature of their exchange or the language points they are expected to cover. Role Play involves participants to 'act' in a given role which is clearly defined on a role-card. It is very much akin to acting in a play.

In Simulation the group members would not be expected to place emphasis only on a given set of language points, and effective communication should be the outcome, rather than the strictly correct use of vocabulary and structures. The group is given a task which may last a single period or stretch over a number of sessions. These tasks may range from the fairly short to the longer-term, more wide-ranging and complex (see www.languages.dk/methods/methods.html). The length of the Simulation need not be connected to the complexity of the language required to carry it out, as the language skills which students bring with them to the exercise are what determines its linguistic complexity. At the end of the exercise the group will have arrived at some decision or series of decisions and choices which they will be expected to explain and justify. However, the process of the exercise is of at least as great importance as the product in the sense that the linguistic interaction among the students will determine its effectiveness and success.

"On the other hand, simulations, where simple or complex do not specify the role a person has to play. On the contrary, a task is given which requires participants to resolve a problem of some kind using their own life experience and character. Simulation mimic real life situation as closely as possible. For example, if you have a group of doctors learning English as a second language and they need to practice in a "real life" context, you would set up a simulated situation in a hospital or health centre in which doctors have to meet 'patients' and diagnose their problem, and give treatment or prescriptions. The 'patients' may be given (or create themselves) their symptoms, and the doctors have to find out the cause of the illness (using their own experience) by interacting with the patients. The problem is resolved when the doctor diagnoses the problem, and prescribes therapy," says Kate Wong.

What is Simulation? - 2

In order to succeed, a Simulation should be underpinned by a sense of reality or should create a brand new reality. Ideally, it should be relevant to the lives and interests of the students who are in charge, with the teacher unobtrusively monitoring the proceedings. This feature of Simulation increases students' autonomy and motivation, and lowers their anxiety levels since they are interacting as equals with a small group of their peers rather than performing for the teacher and class as a whole.

Realism can be enhanced, particularly for longer-term simulations, by adapting the classroom so that it simulates the environment in which the exercise is said to be taking place, i.e. for a simulation taking place in an office, the classroom can be adapted to replicate a real working office. Although this desideratum is not always practicable, there are other ways in which the learning environment can be changed to resemble that proposed under the Simulation, such as:

- black/white boards can be adapted to resemble office noticeboards;
- desks can be grouped or separated to simulate work stations;
- posters/visual aids clearly associated with college can be removed and replaced by more appropriate work-related material;
- the radio should be playing, preferably in the target language, or music if not;
- telephones/faxes/computers should be present;
- snacks, hot and cold drinks and personal possessions should be visible at work stations.

Benefits



Simulation...

- gives students the chance to carry out a task or solve a problem together;
- removes error correction from the equation at the time of the exercise;
- allows students to experiment with new vocabulary and structures;
- gives students the freedom to make their own choices and decisions;
- allows students to base their choices and decisions on their own experience;
- allows teachers to monitor progress and participation unobtrusively.
- strengthens cooperation and collaboration skills.
- develops team building skills (life skills).

Drawbacks



Simulation...

- reinforces students' faulty pronunciation;
- allows students to misunderstand and misuse new vocabulary and structures;
- works best with already effective speakers of the target language;
- requires preparation which detracts from target language contact time;
- might allow less motivated students to withdraw from participation;
- leaves teachers feeling ineffective or excluded.

Solutions



Teachers...

- conduct the preparation stage through the medium of the target language; ensure that the Simulation is of relevance and interest to the students;
- construct groups containing mixed or differentiated levels of ability depending on their students' needs
- monitor the groups' language and participation levels during the simulation;

Points to consider - 1

Can the target language be used to explain the nature and purpose of the exercise?

The target language should be used exclusively or as much as possible as the language of classroom management in any case. To revert to the native language for this purpose is to undermine the notion that the target language can be used for real communication.

Are the students sufficiently at ease with the target language generally to cope with the demands of this simulation exercise?

If students are not comfortable in the target language, simulation can allow them to sit back and leave the bulk of the work to other, more articulate, members of the group. Although this is a problem not unique to simulation but to group work in general, the hands-off nature of simulation on the part of the teacher means that the passivity of

such students is exacerbated. If the teacher is to carry out her role in the simulation context effectively, she should remain an unobtrusive monitor and not enter the process to encourage students to play a more active role. This last is necessary if the claims of student autonomy made for simulation are to be realised. See McArthur (1983) and Sharrock and Walsh (1985).

Points to consider - 2

Have the students expressed an interest in the topic of the proposed simulation?

Relevance and a sense of reality are desirable if simulation is to allow students to use the target language to express themselves. Otherwise the exercise becomes role-play which, although useful, removes students from themselves. For the non-linguistic benefits of simulation, see:

<http://uk.cambridge.org/elt/ces/methodolgy/simulation.htm>

http://www.languages.dk/methods/documents/language_sim.htm

Must all simulation sessions be relevant to the students?

Relevance is highly desirable in the context of simulation, and given that simulation is only one of a number of approaches available to the teacher, sessions should be based on and informed by the interests and experiences of students.

Should groups be mixed-ability or banded?

Since the teacher knows her students better than any theorist, it is she who must determine how the maximum benefit can accrue to the greatest number of students. If she feels that less advanced students would benefit from the help of their more advanced peers, she will choose mixed-ability groups. If, however, she feels less advanced students will be intimidated in mixed-ability groups, and for the purpose of differentiation, she should band groups by language level. Rather than follow a prescribed ruling, the teacher should base her decision on her knowledge of the students. Sensitivity must be exercised in the formation of groups so that students do not perceive the existence of "clever" and "slow" groups.

Points to consider - 3

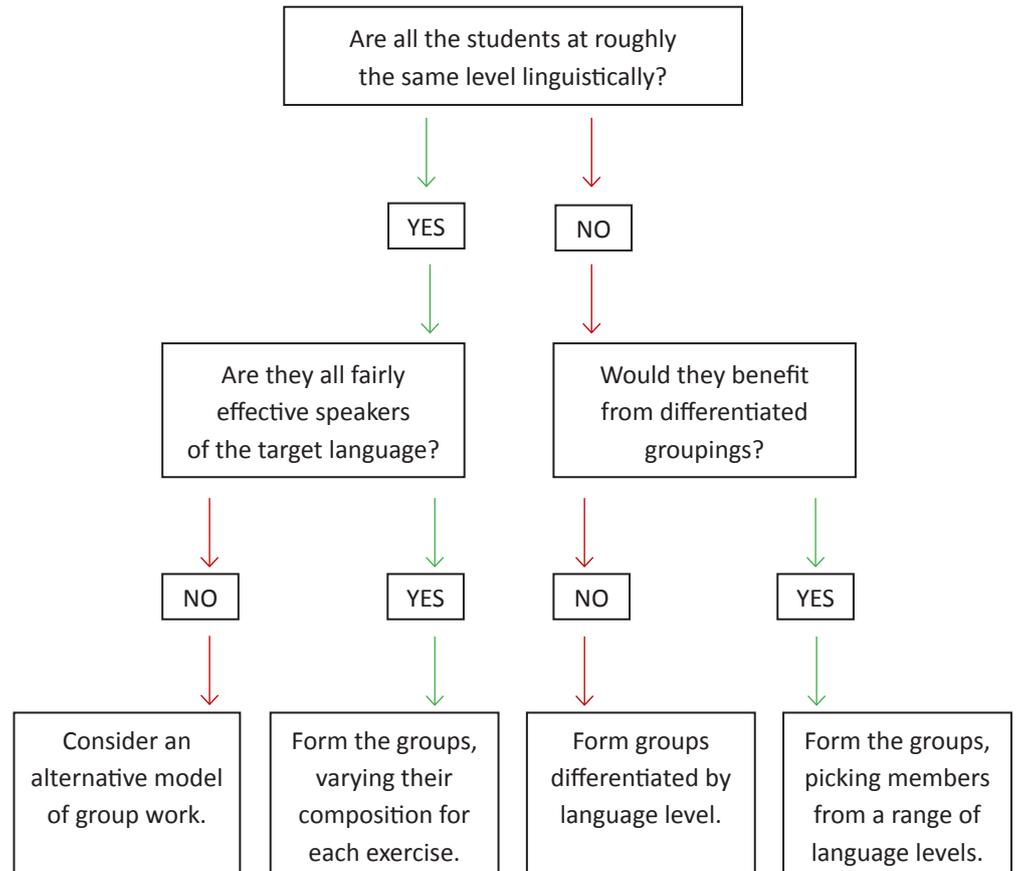
Can the teacher feel comfortable as a monitor listening to students making errors?

Most students make errors in most learning situations. The teacher can consider the simulation session as, inter alia, a diagnostic exercise in which she can note the most frequently occurring errors for later use in remedial teaching sessions. Over-correction of errors in the spoken language can be de-motivating to students and, in seeking to correct errors, the teacher should always ask herself whether effective communication with a native speaker of the target language would have been achieved.

Isn't simulation only really successful when the students are already effective speakers of the target language?

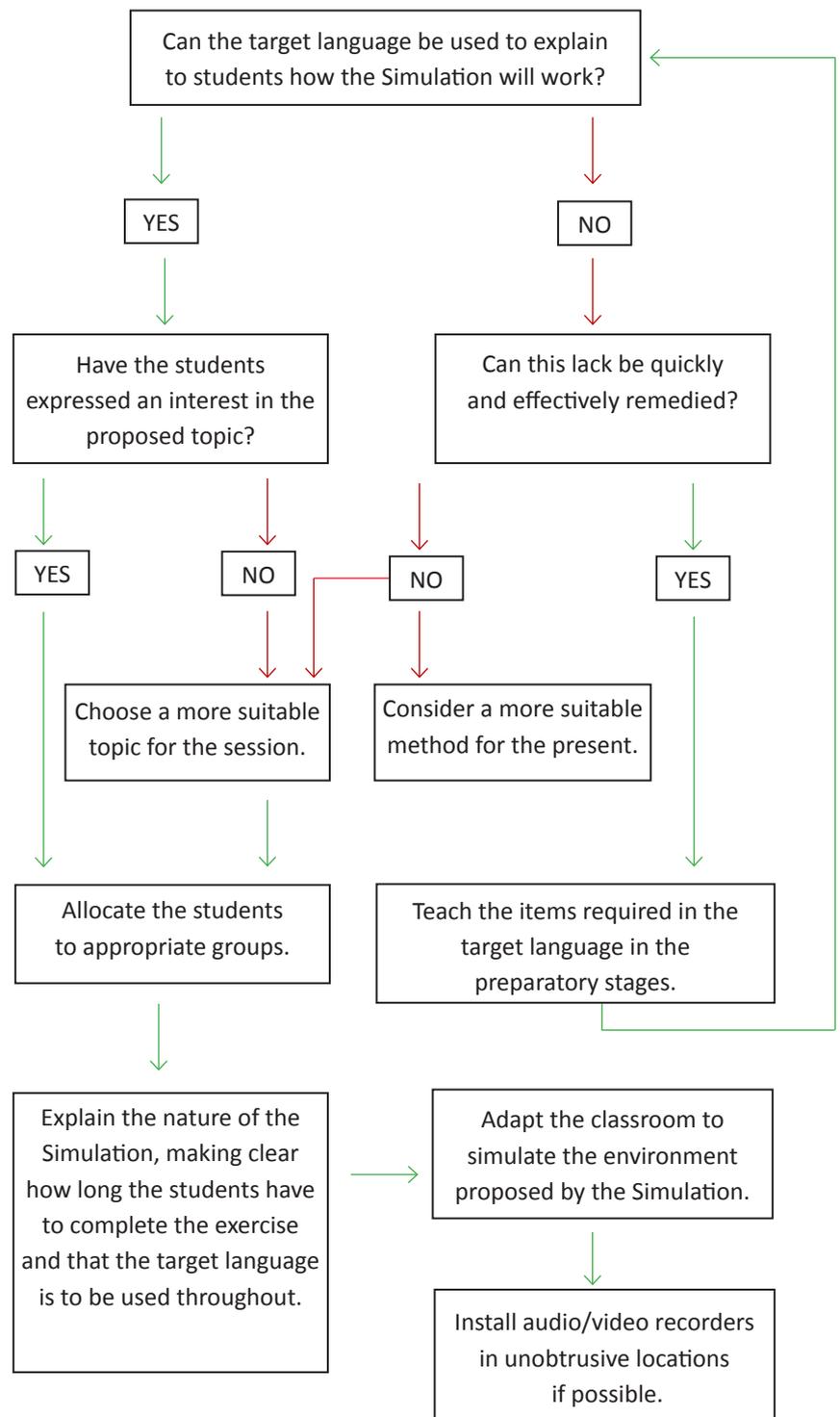
Effective speakers of any language will clearly be able to operate in any setting at a higher and more complex linguistic level, but since simulation is about encouraging students to express **themselves** at their own level, all members of the group should benefit from and contribute to the exercise to varying degrees. However, if students are still grappling with the fundamentals of the target language, their immersion in a long-term simulation might in fact prove de-motivating rather than encouraging. This is why the teacher will form the groups carefully and consider whether simulation will be of benefit to the maximum number of her students.

Formation of Groups



As with most forms of group work, keep friends and enemies apart, so that each group can form its own dynamic in this new "real" environment.

Preparing for a Simulation



Conducting a Simulation

- Ensure that preparation was detailed and adequate, that students are aware of the time available to them to conduct the simulation and its constituent parts, and that they know exactly what is expected of them at the various stages of the process.
- Has it been possible or necessary to adapt the classroom so as to replicate the environment posited by the simulation?
- Do the students have all the materials required to carry out the simulation to the best effect?
- Has monitoring equipment been set up to record the proceedings of each group?
- Perhaps the teacher's being in the classroom will not distract students, in which case recording equipment may not be necessary. But ensure that any notes on errors are made out of sight of the students.
- Are all groups and their members working effectively and contributing to process? If not, it may be necessary - outwith simulation time - to mention this in order that the next sessions may be more productive.
- Has discussion ground to a halt? If so - without intervening in the session - amend the timetable so that students do not feel they are at a loose end.

Evaluating and Assessing a Simulation

Evaluation

By the end of the exercise the teacher will have gained an impression of how the students and groups performed in general terms, and whether the exercise in itself was successful as an exercise.

In evaluating the efficacy of the exercise, the teacher must bear in mind whether the following questions may be answered positively:

- did the groups know what they were doing?
- were they able to operate without the assistance of the teacher?
- did they operate effectively and carry out all tasks as required?
- did they make decisions and exercise options?
- were all students/groups reasonably well motivated?
- were the bulk of linguistic interactions realistic and natural?
- did the students themselves feel the exercise was of benefit?

Assessment

Although it is difficult to give a student a grade for work carried out as part of a group, by using the recorded material, or notes made during observation, the teacher will be able to assess each student diagnostically on the criterion of whether the majority of interactions would have been comprehensible to a fluent speaker of the target language.

It is for the teacher, in accordance with her institution's guidelines, to determine which levels of pronunciation and usage of vocabulary and structure students have reached as part of the exercise. No guidelines can be given without reference to local practice vis-à-vis grading in general.

Assignment must be pointed out to positive comments. Teacher must think of feedback with compliments and suggestions for improvement. Feedback is also an opportunity for idea exchange.

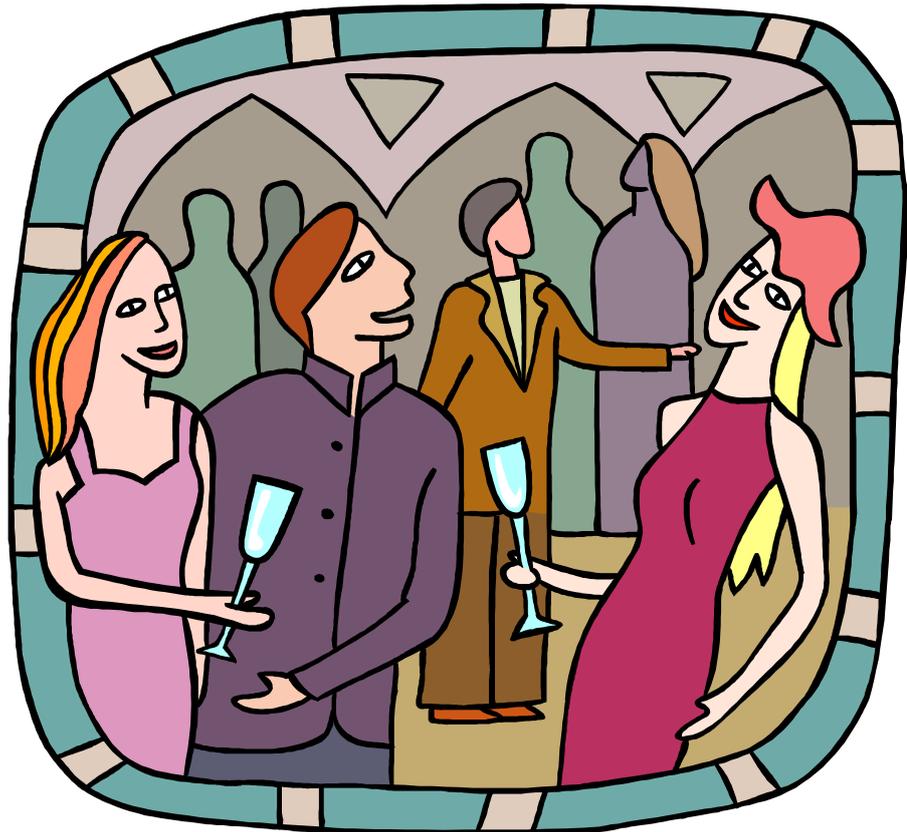
If the feedback seems too negative:

- Wait a period of time to make sure you don't respond "angry".
- Approach the feedback as an opportunity to improve and develop, prioritizing areas to focus on.

Portfolios might be a good way to assess simulations. For more information see: <http://www.upv.es/diaal/publicaciones/amparo5.pdf>

Sample Lesson Plan: Short-term

Ith, òl 's bi sunndach!



The following Simulation lasts for two periods and requires of students that the organise and end of session dinner and concert-dance on behalf of the college's Student Association.

Each group has one period to decide on the details of one particular aspect of the event, such as venue, menu and so on. The second period comprises reporting back and a whole class discussion on the merits and shortcomings of each group's determinations.

Sample Lesson Plan: Short-term

All proceedings are conducted in the target language

Period 1

- The teacher explains to the whole class that the Student Association at college is organising a buffet dinner and concert-dance to celebrate the end of session, and that different groups of students will concentrate on different aspects of the event. Letters have been sent to each group.
- The various aspects of the organisation of the event are outlined and the teacher finds out which students are interested in which aspects.
- Groups are formed by the criterion of interest but also bearing in mind linguistic and other criteria.
- Each group receives a copy of the letter overleaf with their area of interest undeleted.
- The teacher tells the groups that they have one period to decide on their area of the organisation. Each group appoints a Chairperson and Secretary to organise and record the proceedings.
- The groups begin their work. The Chairperson guides the process and the Secretary notes down relevant points, decisions and choices.
- The teacher moves round the class, but not participating or interfering with the work of the groups, and at no time correcting any errors she hears. If particular errors recur, the teacher unobtrusively notes them.

* If the session is being recorded, the teacher need not be present.*

Sample Lesson Plan: Short-term

- The teacher should ensure that all students participate. Differentiation might be the answer for future exercises. If attention is flagging, the teacher may have allocated too long to the exercise and may need to alter the structure of the lesson in subsequent short-term simulations.

The letter from the Student Association

24 April 2004

Dear Fellow Students,

As you know, the Student Association are holding a buffet dinner and concert-dance to mark the end of the 2003-04 session on 18 June 2004.

Your group's offer to help is welcome, and the Committee would be grateful if you could take care of matters concerning the choice of ~~guest speaker/band/~~ menu/~~drinks/transport/venue~~ for the event.

The Committee will be meeting again on 3 May at 3.30 pm to discuss progress. We look forward to hearing the decisions of your group regarding the item left undeleted above.

Yours faithfully,

Catriona NicSuain

Catriona NicSuain

Secretary

Sample Lesson Plan: Short-term

All proceedings are conducted in the target language

Period 2

- Each group chooses a Spokesperson who uses the notes made by the Secretary.
- The Spokespersons outline the choices/decisions of their groups in organising the event.
- The Spokespersons are now open to questioning by members of other groups. For example, why was venue X chosen over venue Y? why band X over band Y? The Spokespersons defend the groups' decisions, if necessary with support from other group members.
- Depending on the nature of the relationship between teacher and students, it might be appropriate for the teacher to repeat some questions, subtly correcting errors.
- Once the whole class has agreed on the various aspects of the event, the decisions may be written on the board or on a sheet of paper as a record.
- Further written work can derive from these two periods - designing posters, advertisements, tickets, etc.

Sample Lesson Plan: Long-term

Cò dh'fhàg mi air eilean leam fhìn?



The following Simulation requires students to imagine that, due to global warming, the low lying parts of the country will become flooded and that only certain high lands and islands will be safe for habitation.

The groups are allocated the uninhabited island of Miughalaigh off the west coast of Scotland, and will be have to prepare evacuation plans.

Each group is limited to 20 people travelling to Miughalaigh in two medium-sized fishing boats. Thus, personnel and material are limited.

The Simulation lasts for five periods, but can be extended to seven as required and as best suits the linguistic abilities of the groups. The lesson plans are on the following pages.

Sample Lesson Plan: Long-term

All proceedings are conducted in the target language

Period 1

- The teacher explains to the class that due to global warming the local population have to move to the hilly island of Miughalaigh. However, there won't room for everyone. There are no habitable buildings left on Miughalaigh and winter is approaching. Basically, the students have to decide on 20 people (or types of people) who will get the chance to set up this new society and survive the imminent flood.
- The class is told that each group needs to:
 - coordinate the selection of personnel;
 - coordinate the selection of materials, foodstuffs, fuel, cultural artefacts, etc;
 - prepare for the first few weeks of settlement;
 - set down the foundations of a viable society.
- The teacher finds out which students are interested in undertaking which tasks, and forms groups accordingly. (Whether the groups are mixed or differentiated is up to the teacher.)
- The teacher outlines how the exercise will work over each period and will make clear that henceforth she will not be participating.
- The class is told that the exercise will extend over five (or seven) periods including the current one, and that the last will be a whole class session in order to report back and discuss outcomes.
- Depending on the level of the class and groups, however, the exercise can be extended over seven periods, with the work covered in Periods 3 and 4 below expanded to four periods (new Periods 3 - 6) each being devoted to only one aspect of the organisation rather than to two.

Period 2

- Each group is given a set of cards (as on p. 22) and told to decide among themselves which members will specialise in which area of concern. The groups also have to elect office bearers.
- The Chairperson decides how the group will work over the following few periods but has to consider the opinions of others in the group.
- The group work through the cards together, noting any possible areas of conflict or difficulty, but do not yet come to any firm decisions.

Period 3 (or Periods 3 & 4 for more detailed discussion)

- The groups begin work on the selection of personnel, etc., the Secretary taking notes as required.
- The groups next decide on how the journey will be carried out.

Period 4 (or Periods 5 & 6 for more detailed discussion)

- The groups consider how the first few weeks of settlement will successfully be carried through.
- Next, the groups discuss how to ensure the long-term viability of the colony.

Period 5 (or Period 7 for more detailed discussion)

- The Spokespersons for each group outline the groups' decisions and seek to explain why they arrived at the decisions they did. For example: why did Group A decide not to allow any elderly women or priests to join the evacuation?
- Groups question each others' Spokespersons on the choices made and decisions reached, and if appropriate the task specialists may enter the discussion in support of their Spokespersons.
- If time permits, each Group's decisions should be displayed for the whole class to read.

Subsequent Work

- The teacher can use her observations for remedial work on particular language points, if necessary.
- If recording equipment was used, students may watch themselves participating in the Simulation. This should serve two purposes:
 - encouraging them by letting them see themselves working through the medium of the target language;
 - helping them to see how/if they are going wrong in terms of vocabulary, structure and pronunciation.
- A whole class discussion might be of value to see if the confidence level of less confident students has been raised.
- The entire Simulation may provide the basis for a variety of extended and differentiated items of written and oral work.

Decision Cards

Who's going with you?

You only have room for 20 people.

Who will you choose, eg:
imam/minister/priest/rabbi?
doctor/nurse/first aider?
grandparents?
Maths teacher/Primary teacher?
computer programmer?
joiner/bricklayer/painter?
rap/hip hop/folk singer?

Why have you chosen those 20?
Do you want to change your mind?
Who was easy to choose?
Who was hard to leave behind?

What are you taking with you?

You can't bring much. You only have two medium sized fishing boats for everyone and everything.

CD player/DVD/video/radio/TV?
books? - what kind?
candles/lightbulbs/torches?
beer/vodka/whisky?
frozen/dried/salted food?
cigarettes/cigars/tobacco/etc?
building blocks?
wool/cotton/black plastic?

What will you really **need**?
Can you afford any luxuries?

The First Few Weeks

It's late November. It's getting wet and cold. The winds are rising and snow isn't far away.

The only buildings left on the island are roofless, the glass has gone on the windows and the doors are off the hinges. There are wild sheep and goats in the hills. Some wild barley and oats are growing nearby. The pier is OK.

If you forgot some essentials, what can you do to get by? Can you?

A New Society

If you survive the winter, you need to plan ahead. The society will need food, homes, infrastructure and children.

Will it be enough just to survive? Is it to be survival of the fittest? What kind of society do you want to live in? Do you want to re-create the society you live in now?

How can you put the foundations in place to ensure that your society does not degenerate into a "Lord of the Flies" type scenario?

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Wong Kate, discussions on the forum at: www.teachingenglish.org.uk