Effectiveness of Role Play in Enhancing Communication Skills of English Language Learners

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Abstract

Language teaching in India mainly focuses on the learning process rather than the teaching of the language. The emphasis is only given on the linguistic competence of the language learner not on the development of the communicative ability of the learner. The absence of a suitable environment for using the language, the failure to use appropriate teaching aids and techniques along with the ignorance of latest developments in English Language teaching among teachers aggravate the situation of English language teaching and learning in India. Role-play is a valuable teaching and training tool where learners take on different roles, assuming a profile of a character or personality, and interact and participate in diverse and complex learning settings. This paper mainly focuses on how to apply it successfully and to take the most advantage of it in English language teaching classroom. The English language teacher should focus on different factors for its success such as: the topic chosen should be real and relevant to the situation; the teacher's role as a facilitator, participant and spectator; need in giving appropriate feedback; correcting the errors; developing linguistic competence and self confidence. Also focuses on the key benefits of the role-play, how it works in a language classroom, steps in constructing a role-play, preparing students for role -play and the teacher's role in role-play.

Key words: Role play, communication skills, ELT, teaching methods

Introduction

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Wigglesworth (2008: 117), an ELT specialist, expressed his views with regards to task based language teaching as "A central tenet of task based language assessments in that the tasks are designed to represent authentic activities which test candidates might be expected to encounter in the real world outside the classroom.". Learners need to learn how to use the target language in "real-life" situations and not structured dialogues which are taught in classroom and role-play like any other task based language teaching technique helps them in language acquisition through real life situations. As Qing (2011) states, "Role-play is defined as the projection in real life situations with social activities" (p. 37).

Role Play

Role-play is an effective technique which, arouses the interest of learners, and makes the language acquisition impressive as Lucantoni (2002) points out, "role-play can be a very enjoyable for learners and provide excellent opportunities for using language in real life situations".

Ments (1999) comments that role-play are "motivational and effective because it involves activity" (p. 13). In role-play the participant is asked to play the part of someone else. He is given details about the person and situation that he is supposed to be in. Role-play must not be confused with acting because, unlike acting, role-playing is focused on how the roles of the players interact with and affect each other. Ments (1999) also comments that the most obvious uses of role-play are in those areas which deal primarily with aspects of communication. (p. 19). Role-play is a communicative activity where the learners can use spontaneous language. It also helps learners to develop real life speaking skills. Ments(1999) also states "by devising scenes of everyday life, in particular those situations which make use of the vocabulary to be learnt, the students can be encouraged to use language in a free and interesting way" (p. 19). Thus it also helps in developing linguistic competence and also empowers the vocabulary. This enables them to use language in their real life situation in a free and interesting way with confidence.

Simulation

Role-play and simulation are separate activities but they are considered to be common activities which are often conducted at the same time and they complement each other. Role-play

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in a simulation exercise is where persons take on assumed roles in order to act out a scenario in a contrived setting. The learners or participants can act out the assigned roles in order to explore the scenario, apply skills (like communication, debate etc.), and to experience the scenario from another view point, and to evoke and understand emotions. Simulation is a problem-solving activity where the student brings his own personality, experience and opinions to the task.

Key Benefits of Role-play in English Language Learning

- Role-play develops communication and language skills.

- Develops social skills when learners collaborate with others and work as a team.

- Encourages learner to express their ideas and feelings in a relaxed environment created by them.

- Allows learner to act out and make sense of real-life situations.

- Allows learner to explore, to experiment and to investigate real life situations and language used in various circumstances.

- It develops listening skills and speaking skills.

- Builds confidence level of team members which in turn can help them in their day-to-day roles.

- It helps the students in critical thinking. They can transcend and think beyond the confines of the classroom setting.

- Helps learners to learn about different cultures.

- It develops creativity and imagination.

- Helps them in creative problem-solving and also helps them in handling difficult situations.

- Teaches lessons that are needed in society like competition and cooperation.

- Allows for the interaction between classmates, and peers.

- Also develops learners' awareness of themselves and others.

- They learn to empathize with others by taking on the role of a character. It will enable each learner to understand different perspectives of the world.

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- Helps the introverted students to speak out and it breaks down "cliques" and "isolates".

- Allows for the exchange of knowledge between students.

- Enables the teacher to understand the various capabilities of students at the same time teacher can also encourage them to develop it.

Role-play Works Different ways

- By learning a concept, vocabulary or an idea through participation and modeling.
- By learning through observation i.e., watching a constructed role-play using actors, simulators and tutors.
- By analyzing the feedback from students and give necessary steps for improvement.
- By re-enacting the situation again in the classroom.

Key Steps in Constructing a Role-play

a) The first step for the teacher is to define the aims and objectives of the role-play in order to practice skills, explore concepts etc.

b) Then the teacher is to determine external constraints like the class size or the space available.

c) Define time limit of the role-play. Construct the role-play by making use of the time effectively with maximum participants

d) Define the setting of the role-play. It has to be defined in brief. This enables the students to understand the context of the role-play setting.

e) Define clear role descriptors and at least few dialogues of major characters.

f) Define observer tasks like taking down the feedback on each role-played, new and improved dialogues etc.

g) Define debrief agenda and also clearly define the facilitator tasks.

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Preparing Students for Role-play

- It is better to use actual locations and put participants in the physical locations where they actually would experience the scenarios which you're trying to replicate in order to make it as realistic as possible.

- Give the personality profile and the list of objectives of each role to the participant.

- The teacher can provide them information through power point or by using any other effective audio visual aids. It is better if the teacher provide the details writing clearly and briefly in short simple sentences which enables the students to know what they must do and how to do.

- Give the students five to ten minutes to complete the task.

- The teacher can ask the students do the task alone or in small groups or in think-pair-share format in which students work individually or in pair and later they can discuss their results or outcomes with their pairs and to the whole class.

- In order to process the student's deliberations, the teacher can ask the participants to write their comments and to make them read in the class after the role-play session.

- Teacher can also lead them to have a class discussion where each student should be given opportunities to talk on the role they played and can justify their differing outcomes or opposing views.

- Videotaping the participants in role-playing scenarios can be used as a valuable teaching tool for evaluation. It allows people to evaluate themselves their strengths and weaknesses and also to record improvement.

- In some cases an authentic role-play experience from the student team may be difficult. So it is also good to bring in consultants and professional actors to get the students trained.

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Using Role-play Cards

Teacher can describe each role in a manner that will let the participant identify with the characters assigned to them. It is better to use the second person 'you' rather than the third person 'he' or 'she.' At the beginning teacher can provide detailed instructions in cue cards.

Cue Card A:

YOU ARE A SHOP KEEPER

1. Greet the customer and ask him what he wants to buy.

2. Describe the qualities of the product and its price.

3. Answer the customer's questions regarding the product.

4. At last say "thank you" to the customer.

Cue Card B:

YOU ARE A CUSTOMER

1. Greet the shop keeper and say what you want to buy when asked by shop keeper.

2. Ask what the price will be.

3. Ask him questions on the products shown.

4. At the end say "you're welcome."

The Role of the Teacher in a Role-play

- A teacher should keep in mind learners' needs and interests in order to choose an appropriate situation for role-plays. Ensure that the selected role-plays should be

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interesting and also it should give the students an opportunity to practice what they have learned. In order to make the role-play interesting it is good to let the students choose the situation among them. Encourage them to suggest themes that intrigue them or to choose a topic from a list of given situations. Teacher can also asks them to write down situations which they encounter in their own life, or when they read a book or watch a movie as this will enable them to construct the role-play in a way which will be interesting to their class members.

- Always provide important role to intelligent, smart students and leave the average students relaxed with less important roles. The good performance of the bright students will be an encouragement to other students and some of them will take up leading roles in the next role-play session. Teacher can also interchange the roles among students based on their ability.

- While deciding on the composition of each group teacher should consider both the abilities and disabilities of the students. For example, a group consisting only of shyest students will not lead to a good performance in role-play so teacher should mix each group with students of different abilities.

- After the selection of the situation of the role-play think about the language needed for it especially, vocabulary. At the initial level, the students are able to tackle the language but when they move towards higher level it will be more difficult to use the correct and appropriate language. So it is better to introduce new words and its meanings related to the role-play situations to the students. It will help them to prefigure accurately what language they need to use in those situations. It will enable the students to get an idea of roles assigned to them clearly also help them to learn new words.

- Provide the students with concrete information and clear role descriptions, so that they could play their roles with confidence. For example, in the situation at a bus station, the person who is assigned the act of giving the information should have relevant details like:

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the times and destination of the bus, price of tickets, etc. with him on a cue card. Information like a fictitious name, status, age, personality etc can also be given in it.

- It is always better if the teacher can take one of the roles and act it out as a model at the beginning level instead of asking for volunteers to act out the assigned role-play in front of the class members.

- Debriefing after the role-play session does not mean that pointing out and correcting mistakes. Pointing out mistakes will sometimes make the students less confident and less willing to do the other role-plays assigned to them .So feedback should be on each students opinion about the role-play and teacher should welcome their comments.

- The aim of the feedback session should be to discuss what has happened in the role-play and what they have learned from it, their valuable suggestions and remarks. In addition to this teacher can also ask them evaluation questions on each role-plays.

- Teacher can also note down mistakes during the role-play. It will provide the teacher with feedback for further practice and revision.

- Teacher should avoid intervening in the role-play with error corrections and do not to discourage the students during their participation in the role-play.

- Teacher can also give the students home task on role play exercises which will in turn help them to learn useful words and expressions. It also enables them to think about the language and to construct the sentence accordingly for an effective role play performance with confidence.

Conclusion

Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language competence and also a lot of fun which in turn makes the English language learning interesting and effective. The encouragement and the teacher's

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motivation help the students to get chance to express their ideas in English, improve vocabulary, learn social skills, listening skills, and also develop critical thinking and creative thinking abilities. Thus role-plays can be considered as an integral part of English language teaching and learning process.

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