

Use of Role Plays in Developing Speaking Skills of Undergraduate Students: An Experiment

S. J. Nikam, M.A., B.Ed., SET., Ph.D.

Associate Professor in English,
Arts, Commerce and Science College, Nashik

Mobile No: 9604640610

sandipnikam59@rediffmail.com

Abstract

Teaching English in India successfully is still a burning issue. After learning English for more than ten years or so, the under graduating populace cannot communicate in English either in the classroom or in real-life contexts. Therefore, students' proficiency in English has been the constant thought of teachers, teacher trainers, ELT experts, and linguists over all these years. We, as teachers, are always conscious of how we can make our students learn English, how they would become fluent in English. We do some experiments with pedagogical devices in the classroom. This paper is an attempt to find out how do role plays help in developing speaking skills. This paper is also an attempt to find out whether role plays help in developing students' communicative competence.

Keywords: ELT classroom, speaking skills, role play, communicative competence, language skills, communicative approach, techniques to develop speaking skills, Intervention, and observations.

Introduction

Since English is the language of this technological, globalized world, students across the globe have to be on their toes if they want to survive academically. English is the only language that probably will help them acquire a prosperous position in their career in the near future. As far as the undergraduates from Indian universities are concerned, most of them (especially students from traditional courses) lack employable skills, communication skills, and soft skills. They may be good in their domain knowledge, but they may not be able to communicate fluently in real-life situations. This experiment conducted on undergraduates to develop their speaking skills through role plays proved an effective technique for developing speaking skills.

Speaking skills

In our day-to-day use, we need to speak for a variety of purposes, including both formal and informal context like a) to communicate with other, b) to interact with other, c) to express our views/ideas/thoughts d) to discuss in a formal context e) to face an interview f) to give lecture/presentation/talk, etc. So, we need to develop our speaking skills in English to grab new opportunities. It has been noted that students who have presentable English may have a greater chance for further education, finding new prosperous jobs, and even getting a promotion. Therefore, this is a matter of concern for students to learn to speak well and teachers to know how to teach effectively. It is noted that teachers worldwide, in the case of a second language or foreign language, give stress primarily on grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills. In contrast, teaching and other language skills are neglected, especially speaking skill is not paid proper attention in the classroom. Speaking skill has also been overlooked while framing the syllabi.

Widdowson (1978), regarding deficiency of students in communication in English, states:

The problem is that students, especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language and understand its use in normal communication, whether in the spoken or written mode.

The problem has come into prominence in recent years because, due to an enormous increase in educational opportunities, many students in developing countries are entering universities and technical institutes to take up subjects that can only be satisfactory if the students can read textbooks in English efficiently. (Widdowson1978:108)

Therefore, we may find students passing out from colleges and universities without having speaking skills/communication skills. However, it is expected that in today's globalized world, students need to develop their communication, primarily oral communication skills. Nowadays, students are assessed in their oral communication skills in interviews, GDs, and presentations. Therefore, speaking skill has got too much importance these days. So, what is the instant need of the day? Students must get proper training and practice in speaking skills to express themselves in a variety of situations; learn how to communicate effectively in real-life contexts. Henceforth, teachers of English should create such an atmosphere in the classroom, where students have real-life simulated communication, meaningful situation, authentic language learning activities, and a student-friendly atmosphere to promote speaking skills naturally in the classroom. This can be done effectively with the help of different role plays. When a teacher uses various real-life role-plays in the class, students develop their interest in language learning. They may take part in all the activities in the classroom, and in a way, learning can occur in authentic situations.

Communicative Approach

Communication is a very important aspect of your day-to-day life. According to Brown (2003) 'communication is a transfer of information from one person to another, whether it elicits confidence or not, but the information transferred must be understandable to the receiver. It means the primary purpose of any communication is to share and exchange information presentably so that the other person understands it. According to Richards(2001:36), 'CLT is a broad approach to teaching that resulted from a focus on communication as the organizing principle for teaching rather than a focus on mastering the grammatical system of the language'.

The basis for the communicative approach can be found in the notional-functional syllabus approach. Therefore, we can say that it is the natural extension of the notional-functional syllabus. The shift in language teaching from teaching the language system to teaching as communication has been labeled a communicative movement or the 'Communicative Approach'. Before CLT, emphasis was given to the teaching of the language system in earlier approaches, but gradually this is shifted to teaching as communication, and this shift is titled a communicative movement. Numerous ELT experts and linguists noted this shift and contributed to this changing teaching-learning scenario. The linguists like Hymes (1971), Wilkins (1976), Widdowson (1978), Littlewood (1981) Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000) have substantially contributed to the communicative language teaching over all these years.

Communicative Competence

Communicative Competence means the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of situations and contexts. Hymes(1972) put forth the term 'communicative competence' in contradiction to Chomsky's notion of 'linguistic competence'. Chomsky emphasizes the abilities of speakers to produce grammatically correct sentences. In contrast, Hymes' communicative competence enables learners to 'convey and interpret messages and negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts'; Canale and Swain (1980) also contributed to this concept of communicative competence. They put forth four dimensions of communicative competence: grammatical competence (knowledge about what is grammatically correct in a language), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge about what is socially acceptable in a language), and discourse competence (knowledge of inter-sentential relationships). In other words, communicative competence refers to both, i.e., the use of the linguistic system and functional aspects of communication.

Techniques to Develop Speaking Skills

Usually, Communicative language teaching incorporates various activities that are based on real-life situations that take the involvement of the students and do a lot of practice of oral skills. Interaction plays a crucial role in developing communication skills. So teachers ought to

provide ample opportunities to the students to interact among themselves in meaningful contexts; for this, teachers should use a variety of activities that can promote speaking in the classroom.

Kayi (2006) mentions some of the techniques to promote speaking skills. It includes Discussion, Information Gap, Brainstorming, Storytelling, Interview, Story Completion, Simulation, Reporting, Playing cards, picture narration, picture describing, Find the difference, and Roleplaying. In fact, Kayi is not the first person to mention this kind of technique. Still, a couple of researchers and teachers have used some of these techniques, and some of them experimented with some or the most of the techniques stated, some of them have contributed to these techniques. The crucial part is that the author has taken most of the techniques of promoting speaking skills, so they are quite inclusive as far as the teaching of speaking is concerned.

Regarding the present research, I will not go to the suitability and effectiveness of all these techniques because most of the techniques are helpful in one or the other in promoting speaking skills in the classroom. Rather I would like to assess the effectiveness of the role-playing technique in developing speaking skills in this study

Role Play

Byrne (1986) states role to play as a part of drama activity. He uses three terms to cover drama activities. They are mime (mimicry-memorization), role play, and simulation. He tries to differentiate these terms in the following manner:

- a) Mime: The participants perform actions without using words.
- b) Role play: the participants interact either as themselves or in imaginary situations.
- c) Simulation: this involves role-plays as defined above. However, for this activity the participants normally discuss a problem of some kind with some setting that has been defined for them.

In fact, it is noted that role play and simulation are commonly used in the teaching of English to develop communicative competence, whereas mime seems more appropriate as language games. This activity can be performed without using words like brainstorming sessions at the initial stages. This activity leads to language learning in further activities.

According to Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000), role plays play a crucial role in the communicative approach. They allow students to practice communicating in different social concepts and different social roles.

Brown (2001) says that 'role play minimally involves a) giving a role to one or two group members and b) assigning an object or purpose that participants must accomplish'.

In *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, role play is stated as a 'learning activity in which you behave in the way somebody else would behave in a particular situation.'

There are quite a few linguists who have accepted the utility of role plays in the classroom and some of the researchers conducted studies on the use of role plays in the teaching of English. For example, Ananda Kumar Bitra (2012) conducted a study on tertiary level students of the particular college of Andhra Pradesh using role plays to develop speaking skills. My present study is very similar to this but on a small scale. Ananda has thoroughly experimented with role plays in the classroom while I have conducted it on a small group of students by selecting some of the role plays for developing the speaking skills of the undergraduate students. The procedure part is different from this while assessing the students' response after deploying a couple of roles plays on undergraduate students. Along with this, I have been used audio-visual tracks as well to some extends for this study.

Research Procedure for the Present Study

Based on observations of teaching English at undergraduate classes, I felt the need to conduct this kind of study at the undergraduate level. As I have observed, in regular teaching especially compulsory as a subject, students are not good in English, especially in speaking skills. So I decided to do some experiments in the class to make my students learn English. Fortunately, the newly prescribed syllabi of the first year BA (Pathway to Success) included the communication skills aspects consisting of some dialogues of some commonly occurring situations/role plays. So, it is also a part of first-year BA syllabi. So after improvising on those topics for role-plays and dialogues, I have decided to use them in the present study. Since it is a part of the syllabi, I need not give extra time for the same. So, only instead of one single lecture of 45 minutes, I took two lectures continuously for 90 minutes (one hour and thirty minutes) for 15 days. That is how I conducted a study for the present study.

My study incorporates three phases:

- 1 Pre-intervention phase
- 2 Intervention phase
- 3 Post-intervention phase
- 4 Interactions with the students

Pre-intervention phase:

Initially, in the pre-intervention phase, I formed a group of 20 students into ten pairs. Then, I gave them different role-plays to perform without telling them much about the experiments and role-plays. This pre-intervention phase is similar to that of a pre-test. I had not given any pre-test, but I noted the observation during this kind of pre-intervention activities. Five role plays were selected to perform; students were given options to choose anyone from them; at least one role play had to be completed by two different pairs of students. During the pre-intervention phase, I have noted the following observations:

- 1 Students were hesitating to participate in those activities.
- 2 Students were very shy as they were directly asked to perform role plays
- 3 They do not have much familiarity among themselves
- 4 They might not have done this kind of activities earlier
- 5 They didn't know how to behave during the performance of role plays
- 6 Their body language was not proper
- 7 There were some problems in their pronunciation
- 8 They didn't use appropriate vocabulary and phrases according to the situations
- 9 Some of them feel very awkward during the performance
- 10 They committed mistakes in the case of sentence structures
- 11 What they talked about was not accurate
- 12 They lacked fluency as well

Intervention Phase

During the intervention phase, initially, I took two sessions to inform students about the experiment and role-plays. During these two sessions, I also enacted two role-plays with the help of my colleague. It created a good background for students to get into the activities. I also used some brainstorming activities to develop a friendly and informal atmosphere in the classroom. The detailed plan of the study is as follows:

Day	Name of the phase/activity	Hours	Remark
1	Pre-intervention phase/ pre-test phase	2 hrs. & 30 minutes	Observations noted during the phase
2	Informative session	1.30 minutes	Information about role plays
3	Brainstorming activities	1.30 minutes	04 brainstorming activities used
4	Intervention: Scripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Roleplay
5	: Scripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
6	: Scripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
7	: Scripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play

8	: Scripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
9	Intervention: Unscripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
10	: Unscripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
11	: Unscripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
12	: Unscripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
13	: Unscripted role plays	1.30 minutes	Role play
14	Post-intervention Phase/post-test phase	2.30 minutes	Observations noted during the phase
15	Interaction Session	2. Hrs.	General interactions about how this program helped students in developing their speaking skills at all and what extend

I have used role-plays from the first-year B.A. textbook and role-plays from the book entitled 'Language in Use by Cambridge University Press. After having improvising some roles, plays have been used for the present study.

Observations Noted During the Post-intervention Phase

- 1 Students have participated in role-plays of the post-intervention phase enthusiastically.
- 2 Students were quite bold to perform role-plays during the post-intervention phase.
- 3 They now got familiar with their fellow students
- 4 They are pretty familiar with role plays now, and ready to perform any role plays they tell.
- 5 They came to know how to behave during the performance of role plays in a variety of situations.
- 6 Their body language was immensely improved by practicing role-plays. In addition, they are quite friendly with their classmates to take part in communication.
- 7 Their problems of pronunciation were solved to some extent, as in the case of scripted role-plays; their loud reading was taken to a greater extend. It helped them to improve their pronunciation. And they also agreed to work on their pronunciation with the help of loud reading and audio tracks
- 8 They started using appropriate vocabulary and phrases according to the situations in communication.
- 9 Most of them become quite free to communicate with their fellow students in a quite friendly manner.

- 10 Their mistakes in the case of sentence structures have been improved substantially.
- 11 They started talking as much as possible accurately
- 12 They have agreed to work on their fluency by practicing more role plays in real-life situations and listening to more audio-visual tracks.

Conclusion

Thus, this study proved helpful in providing numerous opportunities and practice to the students in speaking skills. As students were a week in English, especially speaking, this experiment helped them authentically improve their speaking skills. As a result, students became motivated for language learning, and they are now quite ready to communicate in real-life situations. They are easily able to crack a conversation in real-life situations. This study has brought this kind of drastic change in their attitude toward language learning. This proper attitude for language learning will help them acquire language thoroughly in a concise span of time.

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