Role Play –
An Integrated Approach to Enhance Language Skills (LSRW) of the ESL Learners – A Collaborative Action Research Report

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Abstract

In India, particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the participation of students in English language classrooms is minimal. There are numerous reasons for this, like low confidence levels, improper exposure and practice of language skills and so on. To add to this situation, majority of the English language classrooms in India is teacher-centered and it affects the students' participation and thus their role and spirit are undermined. Under these circumstances, Collaborative Action Research (CAR) methodology is employed by the researchers with the objective to overcome the existing problems using role play as a tool. Role

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play is used effectively as a tool as it supports students' participation and enriches their social skills. CAR promotes collaborative discussions, self-reflective thinking and systematic phases of problem-solving. This paper makes an attempt to enhance students' participation and their ability to use English language in a variety of academic and professional situations besides integrating LSRW skills.

Key words: Collaborative Action Research, Role Play, Students' Participation, English Language Classroom.

Introduction

One of the significant observations made by several research studies on English language teaching and learning in India is lack of students' participation in classroom discussions due to low confidence levels and ineffective exposure to language skills and practice. Several attempts have been made to address such long standing problems in the context of second language teaching and learning. Students' inhibitions such as shy, fear, low confidence levels and language problems have never been addressed appropriately and adequately in schools, colleges and universities. In addition to these, the scenario of English language classrooms is largely teacher centered and consequently the role and spirit of students is undermined. Many training programmes and conferences have been conducted to address and overcome such critical issues of ELT in India. Such programmes have helped improve teaching and learning only in certain groups but the benefits have not reached the school system in general. Moreover, English language as reported by Chaitanya & Bhavani (2012), has been taught like a subject rather than as a means for the expression of one's inner self and though process. Hence, there is a need to empower practicing teachers with the help of continuous professional developmental

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programmes such as Collaborative Action Research (CAR) which promotes collaborative discussions, needs analysis, series of systematic problem solving phases and self-reflective thinking. Such things always become a platform for brain-storming sessions through research of various problems and their solutions in the process of effective teaching and learning.

One such attempt which was made by the researchers collaboratively is the use of role play through the methodology of CAR. The aim of this research is to increase student participation in and outside classrooms. It is a small scale research study conducted for three weeks in English language lab sessions. Since the attempt has attained the intended objectives of the research to a great extent, it is decided to share the researchers' experiences with a wider teaching community.

The above mentioned is the introduction where the problem of the research study is presented. The ensuing sections present information on objectives, sample, tools, methodology and procedure of the research. The present research paper, as stated above, is a small scale research study and is aimed at attaining the following objectives.

Objectives

- To encourage students' participation and to reduce their inhibitions

- To integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills

- To improve negotiating skills and to give form to their thoughts

- To enhance students' ability to communicate in real time/authentic situations.

Sample of the Study

The subjects of the research are undergraduate students pursuing Civil Engineering course (I year B.Tech.). 30 students were selected as sample of the research. This is a heterogeneous group of students coming from various socio, economic and cultural backgrounds.

Research Tools

Research tools such as personal observation and informal student interviews were used to elicit the response of the students. These tools are used for data collection and the data gathered was analyzed using qualitative methods.

Methodology and Procedure of the Research

CAR methodology is employed by the researchers with an aim to overcome and find solutions to the existing problems. The study was conducted in 3 sessions of English Language & Communication Skills Lab (ELCS Lab) and each session is of 2 hour and 30 minute duration totaling to 7 hours and 30 minutes spread over a period of three weeks.

Collaborative Action Research (CAR)

Action research is the name given to an increasingly popular movement in educational research. It is a form of self-reflective enquiry which is being used in educational institutions' curriculum development and professional development of teachers. Action Research is a form of `research where teachers play a pivotal role of researchers besides being teachers in their classrooms. It promotes teachers to be constant and meticulous observers of their own classes.

As a part of this research, they collaborate, discuss and research their own classrooms with an objective of finding out the problems and solutions pertaining to the teaching and learning process (McNiff, Jean 1998).

The idea of conducting and publishing this study has emerged out of personal observations made by the researchers (faculty). Then the members of faculty decided to collaborate and employ action research to find out appropriate solutions to the existing problems. It is a small scale and context specific research study conducted in 3 English language lab sessions. The subjects as mentioned above are I year students and the research process, data collection and analysis was continued for 3 lab sessions.

The present research article begins with the Role play and its significance in enriching student participation. Subsequently, a brief analysis of the role play adopted from the textbook (*Enjoying Every Day English*) compiled by A. Ramakrishna Rao *(*2008) is presented. It is followed by the actual procedure of the study and its findings. This study intends to empower participation of students in classroom discussions and to enrich their ability to use language effectively in real time situations.

Role Play and its Significance in Enriching Students' Participation

As stated above, Role play is one of the pivotal tools that help, encourage participation and reduce inhibitions. Role play has been successfully used in EFL/ESL classrooms across the world. In accordance with this, Richard Courtney (1974) says that mechanisms such as play acting and thought are interconnected; they help students to test out reality, to minimize personal anxieties and inhibitions, and to master their fields of action. Role play gives a valuable

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opportunity to the students to hone their English language skills (i.e., Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) in an integrated way. For instance, the process of role play begins with the instructions of teachers on role play and its relevance in language classrooms. It is followed by the briefing of the role play used for the session and the discussion with the students on assigning roles to them. This discussion provides scope for students to interact with their teachers and peer group which in turn contributes to their listening and speaking skills. This is followed by the teachers' advice to go through the relevant material on the intended role play, besides writing dialogues for the specific roles assigned to them. Such activities as a part of the role play promote their reading and writing skills. Thus, various phases involved in role play promote negotiating skills and communicative competence of the students.

This apart, it helps faculty to demonstrate the delivery of dialogues with requisite modulation of voice in harmony with appropriate body language. According to Brown (2001) as cited in Huang (2008), role-play modestly engages (a) offering a role to one or more members of a group and (b) giving a goal or purpose that participants must attain. Role play is a learner-centered activity as it develops students' enthusiasm to learn the subject matter and to discuss the contents therein. According to Poorman (2002), integrating experimental learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject matter and understanding of course content.

Brief Analysis of "The Connoisseur"

"The Connoisseur" a short narrative written by Nergis Dalal is autobiographical in nature. It reflects some of the typical situations in her life. The outline of the story from the blog English opera is as follows:

The author happened to meet Miss Krishna at an art exhibition. Miss Krishna was about sixty-five, a spry, thin spinster. She spent all her life looking after her ailing mother. She had a younger sister who got married and left home many years ago. The early life of Miss Krishna was one continuous struggle with poverty and lack of affection from her mother. She had been starved for the beautiful things.

Once the author invited Miss Krishna to stay with her while Miss Krishna's house was being painted. Miss Krishna entered with an array of black tin trunks which had caused the writer's curiosity to rise. The author found Miss. Krishna with n a large battered leather purse, the handles looped over her wrist securely. Miss Krishna showed her acquisitions to the author, and those were exquisite items, beautiful, polished and jeweled.

One morning the author received news that Miss Krishna had had a heart attack and was dead. Her sister had been informed to attend the funeral. Miss Krishna had left everything to the author by 'will' and to her sister as the next beneficiary. But the author did not agree to take the collection of Miss Krishna. She had taken only her own little clock which she lost three months ago.

From this lesson, one is generally expected to learn etiquette, social life and good language skills. In view of this, few discussions were held among faculty whether the lesson should be taught in a conventional way (i.e. just as a lesson) or in a student centric method (i.e., role play).

During several collaborative discussions held among faculty researchers, it was decided that the lesson should be taught in a practical way using role play. In order to deliver the contents

of the lesson so as to reach all the students in the class, it was decided to deviate from the conventional method. The contents presented in the lesson encouraged the researchers to select role play as a tool. The reasons are obvious since the method is likely to encourage students to reflect and enact real-time situations and to learn various aspects of life and behavioural traits. Such attempts on the part of students encourage their participation and expose them to social life and etiquette.

The information presented above, deals with the significance of role play in enriching student participation and a brief analysis of the role play adopted for the study. The ensuing section details actual procedure of the research.

This small scale research was begun with an aim to increase participation of students and to enhance their communicative competence. The first lab session was started with discussion among faculty and students on the importance of role play and how it promotes student autonomy in language learning. The discussion went on fruitfully and majority of the students have expressed their willingness to be part of the proposed role play using the lesson 'The Connoisseur'. This process was begun with identifying some significant scenes of the lesson.

Students are divided into six teams consisting of 5 members in a team. The heterogeneous teams are meticulously formed taking into consideration gender, social status, medium of instruction and so on. The motive behind the formation of such teams is to help introverts seek motivation from the extroverts, sociable students to lead the team, and all the members get the opportunity to interact with members of the opposite gender in a team.

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Based on the discussion among the learners and the faculty, the narrative was divided into the following five scenes to undertake role play.

Scenes

Scene 1 – Visit of Miss Krishna to the author's house – introduction and interaction of Miss Krishna with the author – the backdrop of their first meeting

Scene 2 – Miss Krishna's house moving – her annoying and troublesome stay with the author -– surprise and shock to the author – author's furious response

Scene 3 – Miss Krishna returns to her hovel – Continuation of friendship with the author – Shopping of small and beautiful things – elegant collection of Miss Krishna with reminiscences

Scene 4 – Author's visit to Lal's house – Discussion of Tea cup set – author's findings – Interaction with Miss Krishna about Lal's Tea cup set – Responses of Miss Krishna

Scene 5 – Sudden demise of Miss Krishna – Funeral – 'Will' executed by Miss Krishna – Disclosure of Miss Krishna's wonderful collection of articles – Author's Table clock

The above mentioned are the significant scenes identified by the students and faculty. It was also decided to divide roles among the students and was followed by preparation of dialogues with the help of text book, peer group discussions and advice of faculty. The following is the procedure adopted for writing dialogues.

Dialogue writing

The process of writing dialogues for the role play was begun with peer group discussions which helped students to develop their first draft. Under the guidance of the faculty, students further reviewed and revised their dialogues in the consequent drafts. Thus, with the collaborative efforts of students, they were able to produce final draft in a week's time.

During this course of time, students have experienced language learning in a more meaningful and encouraging way without their conscious efforts. This collaborative work has facilitated them in several ways as they get opportunities to listen to their faculty, peer group and outsiders on the role play. It has also actively involved them in speaking skills as they have to respond to their faculty, peer group and outsiders to express their views. In addition to these, they have read their prescribed role play and other general information available on role play on the internet. Thus, they have put in great efforts to improve their reading skills without being aware of it. Finally, they have intently focused on writing skills in the form of writing and revising their drafts several times. Thus, the role play has encouraged the students to come forward and participate actively in discussions, besides improving their social skills and etiquette. The whole process of doing role play facilitated students to enhance their LSRW skills. The efforts of the students have been fruitful as they were able to experience all those mentioned above.

Developing dialogues for the characters and scenes also helped students to empathize with the characters, to comprehend the situation and to undertake the role in total agreement with the narrative.

The information presented above states the process of writing dialogues for the role play and it leads to the logical next step of practicing and enacting the role play. The ensuing section focuses on them.

Practice of role play

The process of writing dialogues was completed with the final approval of the faculty. It led to the next step of practicing their role play. The practice sessions were begun in the English Language Lab sessions for about a week's time. During these sessions, students had an opportunity to watch performances of other groups which helped them to know the merits and demerits of role play. This apart, majority of the students have gained confidence and shed their inhibitions to a great extent. After a reasonably good performance, suggestions were given to them to exchange their roles and practice, as it helps them to grasp the total scene of the role play. Then, students are given the suggestion to take up their own roles and practice again for several times. When students gain confidence to perform role play without any assistance they are encouraged to take up the role play before the class.

This practice helps students to cope with the dialogues, situation, and characters in the play and to empathize with the character which in turn helps them to undertake role play in the best manner possible. Thus, the practice sessions have been conducted fruitfully and it led to the final phase of performing the role play before the class.

Performance of Role Play

After a two week rigorous rehearsal sessions, majority of the students have expressed their willingness to act in the final performance. All the students have started off with sincere

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approach to give their best by giving life to their roles. They were quite enthusiastic to undertake role play. They gathered all the articles and costumes that aptly suit the respective scenes. The costumes, the preparation and arrangement of articles gave the set a sense of ambiance as described in the narrative.

All the six teams, comprising of five students in each, showed interest and initiation to take part. All the six teams had done thorough preparation and rehearsals which reflected in their great performance.

All the scenes were enacted the way they were planned. The delivery of dialogues reflected a feel for the character. They had also taken care of emotions and body language of the character. The performance and the enthusiasm of the students stimulated one and all in the class. It was a joyful and memorable language learning experience.

The actual performance of the role play which has emerged out of several rehearsals on the part of students was presented above. The following section deals with the findings of the research study which are drawn with the help of the tools of the research.

Findings

Research tools such as personal observation and informal student interviews were great sources of help for the researchers to elicit responses and to arrive at the findings of the research. The findings of the research were positive and encouraging. Some of the vital findings are mentioned below:

- The whole process has encouraged the students to a great extent.

- Majority of the students have expressed that they have reduced their inhibitions.

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- It was also evident from the interactions of the shy students that they have improved their negotiating skills.

- Role play has given them required impetus to communicate in a variety of authentic situations.

- As mentioned earlier, role play facilitated the integration of LSRW skills.

- The procedure of the research and activity have helped give sufficient exposure for listening skills as students have to interact with faculty and peer group regularly.

- This research study has also provided good number of opportunities for students to voice their views on various aspects during discussion, practice and execution of the role play.

- It also demanded students to read the original text of the role play besides other available resources on role play to enrich their abilities and contribution.

- Students have got a wonderful opportunity of writing dialogues for various roles besides editing and redrafting their dialogues. This process has gradually enriched their writing skills.

- Majority of the students have overcome the barriers of gender, and socio-economic backgrounds.

- Students have expressed their willingness to participate in such events to get good exposure for participating in public speaking activities.

- The activity has also exposed students to the necessary social skills and etiquette to be followed.

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- The whole process has greatly enriched the interaction between teachers and students.

In addition to the above findings, such activities always cheer up the classroom atmosphere; and in such settings, teaching of textual grammar has also become quite easy for teachers to teach and learners to receive.

Conclusion

This is a small scale research study which aimed at reducing various inhibitions which hamper student participation in classrooms. The study had taken role play as a tool and it employed Collaborative Action Research (CAR) as the methodology to conduct the research. The findings of the research show it attained the objectives of the research to a great extent. The whole experience of the researchers substantiates that activities of this kind do always maximize the role of learners, boost their morale and develop interaction levels between the teacher and the taught for the process of effective teaching and learning.

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