

A Role Play Activity with Distance Learners in an English Language Classroom

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Introduction

In recent years, language teaching has focused on the learning process rather than the teaching of the language. The emphasis is not only on linguistic competence of the language learners but also on the development of their communicative ability. In order to develop the learners' communicative ability, the teacher needs to create a scenario to teach the target language in a vibrant, active and interesting manner.

Thus, extended activities in the form of role play, simulations and problem solving are vital in developing the communicative ability of the learners. These activities require the learners to go beyond a text. They require the learners to have a sound understanding of a text and be able to apply their knowledge outside the classroom and their own experiences into the activities.

According to Crookall and Oxford (1990), there is little consensus on the terms used in the role playing and simulation literature. A few of the terms often used interchangeably are 'simulation', games, role play, simulation-game, and role play simulation and role playing game.

Extended activities can be carried out at different levels depending on the learners' language proficiency. The role of the teacher in such activities will often depend on the learners and their language abilities. However, the teacher is not wholly responsible for the learners' language acquisition as students must also play their part to be motivated in following the lesson.

Scarcella and Crookall (1990) elaborate how simulation facilitates second language acquisition. In three learning theories they discuss how learners acquire language when:

1. they are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input;
2. they are actively involved; and
3. they have positive attitudes.

In this paper, the writer shares her experiences on a role play with distance learners in an English Language classroom.

Background to the Study

One of the requirements of the English Language proficiency courses offered to distance learners of National University of Malaysia is to make the course as close as possible to the courses offered to students on-campus in terms of course content and evaluations. English for Social Sciences is based on a study guide which wraps around the text *Global Views* by M.E. Sokolik make the course comprehensible for distance learners. The course is aimed at equipping them with integrated skills in English to enable them to cope with language requirements in the academic and work environment.

Role play was chosen as one of the tasks in this course to create a situation for the learners to actively interact in the language, thereby making the language learning more meaningful. At the same time, the learners are introduced to the different learning styles -- listening, remembering, discussing, writing and presenting.

For the purpose of this study, the distance learners from the Kuching, Sarawak Centre were used as the sample. The class comprised 15 working adults. Except for two learners, the rest were all primary school teachers. In terms of spoken skills, the teachers rated

themselves as poor. They do not teach English Language at school and neither do they use it at work place or at home. Thus they have difficulty conversing in English.

Distance learners from different districts meet their respective instructors twice a semester in their tutorial centre. Each meeting is made up of six contact hours. These learners are quite different from the mainstream students. They do not meet as often as the latter which in a way inhibits interaction (perhaps due to shyness and unfamiliarity).

Individual work such as task-based activities may hamper or minimize communication among the learners. Full time students in normal classes who have plenty of contact hours for teacher-student consultation may not face such problems.

Role play in this distance learning class allows the objectives of the course to be met in the limited time, through an integrated approach which allows the practice of language skills, content and interaction skills and strategies,

As this was a tertiary level class, the writer used newspaper reports on the Japanese Encephalitis outbreak collected over a period of time. This issue was specifically chosen as it made headlines in all Malaysian newspapers and the electronic media during that period. It included the views of the farmers, medical experts, consumers' rights and the feelings expressed by the affected residents.

The writer had chosen this issue to provide an opportunity to the learners to practise a real-life situation. It was also appropriate for role play because it involved many personalities thus allowing the learners to assume those roles. The topic chosen was good as it highlighted social issues.

The teacher's role in giving clear instructions was equally important. The learners were asked to get into groups of five and choose a leader for each group. All the reports were given to the leaders who assigned individual roles to each group member. They were asked to improvise the message in the reports which were not too structured and to find a structure that fits into a real life situation.

Apart from that, the learners were asked to jot down in a diary, journal or log book, their feelings, comments, thoughts and perceptions about a particular learning experience related to the role play. Such entries could provide opportunities to the learners for self-reflection and self-observation.

At the end of the activity the teacher conducted a session to get feedback from the learners on their participation. This is important for any activity based learning as it helps to reinforce the aim and purpose of the activity. Besides that, learners develop awareness and confidence in their own ability and learning strategies. (Refer to Appendix A for additional information on the role play.)

What is a Role Play?

Larsen-Freeman (1986) explains that role plays, whether structured or less structured, are important in the communicative approach because they give learners an opportunity to practise communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles.

A role play is a highly flexible learning activity which has a wide scope for variation and imagination. According to Ladousse (1987), role play uses different communicative techniques and develops fluency in the language, promotes interaction in the classroom and increases motivation. Here peer learning is encouraged and sharing of responsibility between teacher and the learner in the learning process takes place.

Role play can improve learners' speaking skills in any situation, and helps learners to interact. As for the shy learners, role play helps by providing a mask, where learners with difficulty in conversation are liberated. In addition, it is fun and most learners will agree that enjoyment leads to better learning.

Learners' Feedback on the Role Play

The activity was explained and short role descriptions were provided. The amount of time for the role play was negotiated. For the purpose of obtaining feedback from the learners, the teacher recorded what the learners had expressed at two different times. First their feedback was recorded when the teacher started explaining the role play and the procedure to the class. The learners' feedback was recorded for the second time after the presentation. Besides recording, casual interviews were conducted with the learners in order to allow them to reflect on their presentation.

Learners' feedback was divided into three categories: the preparation stage, the presentation stage and the learners' overall impression regarding the activity.

Preparation Stage

The majority of the learners stated that the activity created the atmosphere that encouraged the reading of the reports carefully although the issue did not interest them earlier when they saw it in the newspaper. They were compelled to find out the meaning of certain difficult words in the article in order to prepare for the role play.

In the early stages of the role play the learners were uncomfortable and uncertain. This led to initial lapses of silence. Soon they began helping one another to decide who should speak. Towards the end, their shyness left them and they began prompting each other with ideas.

If not for this activity they would not have found out much about this particular issue. Some learners said that the activity gave them a chance to do group work and allowed much free interaction especially to clarify the meanings of difficult words. They enjoyed working together and took pride in their roles and wanted to give their best. The learners said they developed confidence in making the necessary adjustments to the report as they saw fit. This activity also set the stage for them to interact more with the teacher as they kept asking a lot of questions to ensure they were on the right track.

Presentation Stage

The learners attempted to perform a real life talk show. Throughout the presentation, they showed enthusiasm and a sense of fairness -- listening to others in the group to express their views. Some learners were seen taking down notes, perhaps to be better prepared in handling their turn. They also played their role as the audience by clarifying and giving their opinion at the end of the presentation. In doing so, their interest was heightened and the likelihood of remembering the language skills being introduced was strengthened. They spoke more and more unselfconsciously as they progressed, not fearing that they made mistakes with grammar.

Post Presentation Stage

A post-mortem was held with the learners and they were given the opportunity to give their views and opinion of the activity. Such comments and criticisms can help the teachers to prepare better future activities in other classes.

- Comments given by learners when the role play was explained by the teacher:
 - It would create chaos in the class. The class would be too noisy.
 - We don't understand the issue that much. How are we going to play a real life situation?
 - To take part in a role play is meant for students who can speak well. The weaker ones will be too shy to even contribute their ideas.
 - How could we act like farmers?
 - We may use too many Malaysian words.
- Comments given by learners after the role play:
 - We enjoyed ourselves trying to be someone else.
 - I felt closer with my group members and I realized that by working in groups I learn better.
 - I gained more confidence to take part in such activities in future.
 - My English was not bad after all.
 - This activity made me realize the importance of reading.
 - I think I needed more time to prepare for this role play.

Some Reflections

The main problem faced by the distance learners was the inability to express ideas due to lack of proficiency in the language. However, the strong points noted were that such activities helped the learners increase communicative skills, encourage participation, change the attitudes towards language learning and above all provided them a realistic opportunity to work with others in the classroom. These adult learners given more time for preparation and practice can without doubt improve their performance.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on distance learners whose contact hours with their instructors were limited. The analysis of the feedback has enabled the researcher to a certain extent to establish the learners' language needs. Video recordings would have further helped to validate both the observations made and the feedback.

Conclusion

Although at the beginning the learners had doubts and lacked confidence, the activity was successful in achieving its aims. We want our learners to gain fluency and accuracy in the oral presentation. Being accurate does not mean using structures and vocabulary correctly, but saying the right things in the right place, at the right time. Nunan (1989) describes the communicative tasks “ as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.” manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language w

It is crucial for us as teachers to think and plan what should be done to stimulate and facilitate the use of spoken English for academic purposes effectively when making oral presentation, participating in discussions and in a variety of other classroom situations. We need to think of what kind of approaches can be created for distance learners to participate actively in class and how to successfully achieve the needs especially of the weaker learners who have limited face --to- face interaction.

Language teaching can be an interesting challenge when teachers make the effort to explore a variety of approaches. Role play is just one of the many methods available for exploitation. With some attention given to the needs of the learners, both the teacher and the learners can play active roles in the classroom, making language classes livelier, challenging and above all rewarding.

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Appendix A

- Level:
 - Intermediate
- Time:
 - 30 minutes for preparation, 1 hour for presentation (20minutes for each group) and 30 minutes for follow-up.
- Skills:
 - Expressing views, giving opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying etc.
 - Other skills enhanced are listening, reading, speaking and writing.
- Issue:
 - In 1998, pig farms in several states in Malaysia were affected by the JE (Japanese Encephalitis) outbreak. The virus had claimed several lives. The outbreak disrupted the livelihood of the farm owners, workers and affected residents who had to be evacuated.