

Role Play in Teaching Culture: Six Quick Steps for Classroom Implementation

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Abstract

As language and culture are interrelated, language cannot be taught without culture, but there are many ways of co-teaching language and culture. One of them is role play. This paper addresses the issue of role play in teaching foreign language and foreign culture. It introduces a step-by-step guide to making up a successful role play and examines role play in preparing learners for intercultural communication.

Introduction

There are different ways of teaching second/foreign language (L2) culture. One of them is a role play. Though the concept of role play is not new, scholars did not find agreement on the definition of the terms. Such words as *role play*, *simulation*, *drama*, and *game* are sometimes used interchangeably, but, in fact, they illustrate different notions. Some scholars believe that the difference between *role play* and *simulation* is in the authenticity of the roles taken by students. *Simulation* is a situation in which the students play a natural role, i.e. a role that they sometimes have in real life (e.g., buying groceries or booking a hotel). In a *role play*, the students play a part they do not play in real life (e.g., Prime Minister, Managing Director of a Multinational Company or a famous singer). The other scholars consider *role play* as one component or element of simulation (Greenblat, 1988; Crookall & Oxford, 1990). Thus, in a *role play*, participants assign roles which they act out within scenario. In a *simulation*, emphasis is on the interaction of one role with the other roles, rather than on acting out individual roles. One way, or the other, *role play* prepares L2 learners for L2 communication in a different social and cultural context.

In this paper, I decided to express my understanding of teaching culture with a role play and I will use the term "role play" to determine a teaching technique in which the students are asked to identify with the given familiar or non-familiar roles and to interact with the other role characters within the given sociocultural situation.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Making a Role Play

There have already been some attempts to introduce a guide to making up a role play (Shaw, Corsini, Blake & Mouton, 1980; Milroy, 1982; Livingstone, 1983; Rodriguez & White, 1983; Horner & McGinley, 1990). Scholars suggest different steps and various successions in applying role play in teaching. Based on the empirical evidence, we suggest our step-by-step guide to making a successful role play.

Step 1 - A Situation for a Role Play

To begin with, choose a situation for a role play, keeping in mind students' needs and interests (Livingstone, 1983). Teachers should select role plays that will give the students an opportunity to practice what they have learned. At the same time, we need a role play that interests the students. One way to make sure your role play is interesting is to let the students choose the situation themselves. They might either suggest themes that intrigue them or select a topic from a list of given situations. To find a situation for a role play, write down situations you encounter in your own life, or read a book or watch a movie, because their scenes can provide many different role play situations. You might make up an effective role play based on cultural differences.

Step 2 - Role Play Design

After choosing a context for a role play, the next step is to come up with ideas on how this situation may develop. Students' level of language proficiency should be taken into consideration (Livingstone, 1983). If you feel that your role play requires more profound linguistic competence than the students possess, it would probably be better to simplify it or to leave it until appropriate. On low intermediate and more advanced levels, role plays with problems or conflicts in them work very well because they motivate the characters to talk (Shaw, Corsini, Blake & Mouton, 1980; Horner & McGinley, 1990). To build in these problems let the standard script go wrong. This will generate tension and make the role play more interesting. For example, in a role play situation at the market the participants have conflicting role information. One or two students have their lists of things to buy while another two or three students are salespeople who don't have anything the first group needs, but can offer slightly or absolutely different things.

Step 3 - Linguistic Preparation

Once you have selected a suitable role play, predict the language needed for it. At the beginning level, the language needed is almost completely predictable. The higher the level of students the more difficult it is to prefigure accurately what language students will need, but some prediction is possible anyway (Livingstone, 1983). It is recommended to introduce any new vocabulary before the role play (Sciartilli, 1983).

At the beginning level, you might want to elicit the development of the role play scenario from your students and then enrich it. For example, the situation of the role play is returning an item of clothing back to the store. The teacher asks questions, such as, 'In this situation what will you say to the salesperson?', 'What will the salesperson say?' and writes what the students dictate on the right side of the board. When this is done, on the left side of the board the instructor writes down useful expressions, asking the students, 'Can the customer say it in another way?', 'What else can the salesperson say?' This way of introducing new vocabulary makes the students more confident acting out a role play.

Step 4 - Factual Preparation

This step implies providing 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 railway station, the person giving the information should have relevant information: the times and destination of the trains, prices of tickets, etc. In a more advanced class and in a more elaborate situation include on a cue card a fictitious name, status, age, personality, and fictitious interests and desires.

Describe each role in a manner that will let the students identify with the characters. Use the second person 'you' rather than the third person 'he' or 'she.' If your role presents a problem, just state the problem without giving any solutions.

At the beginning level cue cards might contain detailed instructions (Byrne, 1983). For example,

Cue Card A:

YOU ARE A TAXI-DRIVER

1. Greet the passenger and ask him where he wants to go.
2. Say the price. Make some comments on the weather. Ask the passenger if he likes this weather.
3. Answer the passenger's question. Boast that your son has won the school swimming competition. Ask if the passenger likes swimming.

Cue Card B:

YOU ARE A PASSENGER IN A TAXI

1. Greet the taxi driver and say where you want to go. Ask what the price will be.
2. Answer the taxi-driver's question and ask what kind of weather he likes.
3. Say that you like swimming a lot and that you learned to swim 10 years ago when you went to Spain with your family.

Step 5 - Assigning the Roles

Some instructors ask for volunteers to act out a role play in front of the class (Matwiejczuk, 1997), though it might be a good idea to plan in advance what roles to assign to which students. At the beginning level the teacher can take one of the roles and act it out as a model. Sometimes, the students have role play exercises for the home task. They learn useful words and expressions, think about what they can say and then act out the role play in the next class.

There can be one or several role play groups. If the whole class represents one role play group, it is necessary to keep some minor roles which can be taken away if there are less people in class than expected (Horner & McGinley, 1990). If the teacher runs out of roles, he/she can assign one role to two students, in which one speaks secret thoughts of the other (Shaw, Corsini, Blake & Mouton, 1980). With several role play groups, when deciding on their composition, both the abilities and the personalities of the students should be taken into consideration. For example, a group consisting only of the shyest students will not be a success. Very often, optimum interaction can be reached by letting the students work in one group with their friends (Horner & McGinley, 1990).

Whether taking any part in the role play or not, the role of the teacher is to be as unobtrusive as possible (Livingstone, 1983). He or she is listening for students' errors making notes. Mistakes noted during the role play will provide the teacher with feedback for further practice and revision. It is recommended that the instructor avoids intervening in a role play with error corrections not to discourage the students.

Step 6 - Follow-up

Once the role play is finished, spend some time on debriefing. This does not mean pointing out and correcting mistakes. After the role play, the students are satisfied with themselves, they feel that they have used their knowledge of the language for something concrete and useful. This feeling of satisfaction will disappear if every mistake is analyzed. It might also make the students less confident and less willing to do the other role plays (Livingstone, 1983).

Follow-up means asking every student's opinion about the role play and welcoming their comments (Milroy, 1982; Horner & McGinley, 1990). The aim is to discuss what has happened in the role play and what they have learned. In addition to group discussion, an evaluation questionnaire can be used.

Teaching Culture

Main Approaches to Teaching Culture

Teaching culture has been an important part of foreign language instruction for decades. In the comprehensive literature review, Sysoyev (2001a) indicates that there exist many approaches to teaching foreign culture: *lingvostranovedenie* (teaching language through culture and teaching culture through language) (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov, 1990; Tomakhin, 1996; cited in Sysoyev, 2001a), Cultural Literacy (Hirsch, 1987; cited in Sysoyev, 2001a), ethnographic approach (Hymes, 1962, 1972, 1974; Byram, 1986, 1989; Byram, & Fleming, 1998; Korochkina, 2000; cited in Sysoyev, 2001a), sociocultural approach (Saphonova, 1991, 1992, 1996; cited in Sysoyev, 2001a). Sysoyev argues that although all of these approaches aim to integrate teaching language and culture, they differ in goals, objectives, and context of application.

Sociocultural approach is the most recent approach currently applied in L2 teaching in Russia. Its major objective is to prepare learners for intercultural communication and dialogue of cultures. In their research, Sysoyev (2001 a,b) and Savignon & Sysoyev (In press) provide empirical evidence that sociocultural strategies can be seen as one of the efficient ways of achieving learners' sociocultural competence within L2 communicative competence (Savignon, 1997), and, thus, preparing them for intercultural communication. Role play can be seen as one of the instructional techniques of sociocultural strategy training. Much will depend on the way L2 culture is incorporated in the role play.

Incorporating Teaching Culture into Role Play

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest four role play activities which deal with cultural products and examine cultural behavior and patterns of communication. For example, in one of these role plays, students dramatize an incident that happened to them and caused cross-cultural misunderstanding. In a long run, it will enable them to develop communicative strategies to overcome similar problems in

real L2 communication. However, Byram and Fleming (1998) warn us about the danger of teaching L2 culture via role play. They argue that learners may form false stereotypes and generalizations, which, in their turn, will result in cross-cultural misunderstanding and cultural conflicts. Therefore, there should be developed activities that would examine our beliefs as well as the reasons why we have them. For example, activities dealing with culture shock, cultural differences and perceptions of representatives of L2 societies.

One such role play set was introduced by Smith and Otero (1977). In their role plays, two Americans are traveling through imaginary countries, each role play set represents one of the following lands: Crony, Ord, Fondi, Dandi or Lindi. The two Americans go out on their own to explore what the given land is like. After some time, they want to go back to their hotel, but they have walked far from it and, unfortunately, lost their money. They need enough money for bus fare back to their hotel. They decide to ask two natives for help. The two students, who take on the roles of native citizens, should behave as they think real citizens would behave. In these imaginary lands, there are certain ways of doing things, for example, when Fondis agree with something, they frown and look down. When they disagree, they smile and nod their heads. Dandis stand 12 inches or closer to people when talking to them. Cronies would not listen to a male if he asks for a favor, because in their society everything important is decided by females, males talk only of unimportant things. The students who play Americans have to figure out a proper way to ask money from the natives. If they fail to understand how the things are done in these lands, the natives will not give or loan them the money. These role plays examine nonverbal communication issues and make the students think about the importance of non-verbal communication.

Thus, if introduced carefully, role playing can be very effective for experiencing cultural principles and cultural awareness because it gives an opportunity to be emotionally involved in cross-cultural learning and reflect upon cultural differences. The students learn to examine their perceptions and treat representatives of other cultures with empathy.

Conclusion

In this paper I addressed the issue of using role play as one of the ways of co-teaching a foreign language and L2 culture. I suggested a six-stage step-by-step guide to applying role play in L2 teaching and using role play in preparing learners for intercultural communication.

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