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USING ROLE PLAY IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

Role play is a very powerful and effective way of teaching Business English. It embraces such principles of education as an individual approach, student-oriented learning, content-based approach, interactive learning, communicative approach, and constructivist teaching.

The idea of implementing role play in the language class is not new. It has been around for over 40 years. One of the first definitions of role-play was suggested by E. Aronson and J. M. Carlsmith who described the role playing study as ‘an ‘as-if’ experiment in which the subject is asked to behave as if he [or she] were a particular person in a particular situation” [Aronson, Carlsmith, 1968, p. 26]. This definition clearly doesn’t consider the amusement which is an important motivational lever.

According to G.P. Ladousse, in a role-play, the participants play a “role” in a specific situation or scenario. They can play their own part or someone else’s in a safe environment where they can act, experiment, learn

and teach with no risks of irreversible consequences [Ladousse, 1987]. This definition mentions a safe environment which can be very helpful in making learners speak and act. Students act out situations from real life without the fear of some negative consequences, which makes them relaxed and less inhibited.

The Dictionary of Education defines role-playing as an “instructional technique involving a spontaneous portrayal (acting out) of a situation, condition, or circumstances by selected members of a learning group.” The situation to which the person responds may be either structured or unstructured. This definition points out such characteristic of role play as spontaneity.

In other words, role play is a simulation exercise 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 (maybe communication, negotiation, debate etc.), experience the scenario from another view point, evoke and understand emotions that maybe alien to them. It helps to make sense of theory and gathers together the concepts into a practical experience [Kumar, 2011].

Role-play methodology can be applicable to any audience from children to adults and to different levels of learners. There are a lot of benefits of using role play in the classroom:

1. It gives the opportunity to develop speaking and communication skills; practice the new vocabulary and grammar structures; or elaborate on the new topic which the participants of the course have been working on. Also role play is good for practicing certain speech patterns such as making proposals, agreeing or disagreeing. This learning is retained and recalled better through the role-play experience. When a student is actively involved in his or her learning, he or she is more likely to truly connect with the material and remember the concept for a long period of time [Graves, 2008].
2. It is goal-oriented, which makes students interested in this activity, keeping them active and alert.
3. It helps the students build up confidence as they are supposed to work on their own and make decisions themselves.
4. Thanks to the role play, students understand the gaps in their knowledge and weak points which they need to revise or practice.
5. Since role play makes students use the language in a meaningful and natural context, it helps reveal the real level of their English language proficiency and assess their progress.
6. It encourages creativity, meeting the individual needs of each student.
7. It makes learning fun and creates a lively environment which relaxes people who are overwhelmed or stressed, motivating learning.
8. It prepares learners for actual situations they may deal with at work or in everyday life developing social and communicative skills as well as decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Besides this, students can

apply their prior experience to simulated situations. In particular, this is important in teaching Business English.

9. Role play is teacher-friendly as it requires little preparation.

Despite all these advantages, role play encounters some criticisms: it can become 'too much fun' and disrupt the task, participants can get too involved and lose objectivity, participants may be too shy or reluctant, and the observers may take 'sides' based on their preconceptions. To counter these criticisms, I would like to prove that role play is a valuable teaching and training tool that should be considered for use in routine teaching.

This year I have a group of adults who are taking a Business English course. Most of the students are paying for the classes themselves; nevertheless, there are some who have been sent by their companies. The students who pay for their own classes are more interested and motivated; however, those sent by the employer tend to miss classes sometimes, don't always do their homework, and are not very attentive during the class.

Keeping the group interested and engaged is an important and challenging thing. One of the ways to do so is to make students involved by doing more talking than the teacher does. This can be achieved by the use of role play, which is a sure method to make students speak on their own for some time without the teacher's participation. Assigning a certain role to a student, which he is responsible for, is sure to keep even an inattentive student busy and motivated. Another factor that makes him or her interested is that role-play is team work, and all the students are supposed to play by the rules not to let anybody down. This is a strong motivational lever especially for adults.

When I started using role play in the classroom, some participants had been familiar with this approach from the business training courses they completed, while for others this technique had been new. In the beginning there appeared some problems; specifically, the students were not very objective giving feedback and took sides when they had to judge or make decisions. To avoid this, I had to give them more detailed role descriptors. With time, they learned to follow the instructions and stay impartial and I started allowing them more choice and variability providing them only with the general description of the scenario giving the learners the chance to develop the situation the way they wanted.

To use role play successfully, it is important to remember the following:

1. Role play should be well-prepared. To construct a role-play it is necessary to define the following: (1) aims and objectives; (2) setting; (3) role descriptors with an outline of the students' behavior (what they will say); (4) time-limit; (5) observer tasks (if any); and (6) rules of safety and feedback.

2. The teacher should encourage students to speak English not only during the role play itself but also during the preparation stage.

3. A role play is an extension follow-up activity which is used at the end of each unit or topic. It is necessary for students to learn a certain amount of vocabulary, grammar structures, and speech patterns that they might apply to a specific scenario or situation.

4. The topic of the role play should be interesting, clear, and appealing for everybody; for example, job interview, dealing with customers, or negotiating are safe and universal topics for this activity.

The choice of the role-play relies on the learning agenda; that is, it should be adapted to suit the needs of what is being taught or explored. So role play can be simple or complex, short or long. To illustrate, here are just a few examples that I used in my classes:

1. Student A is the 1st candidate for some job (the students choose the job: the rarer it is, the more interesting the role play will be). Student B is the 2nd candidate for the job; student C, the 3rd. The rest of the class is the board of directors. All the candidates have to leave the room and think about the best way to present themselves at the job interview. Their stories should be convincing as their goal is to be selected for the job. While the candidates are inventing their life stories, the board of directors is supposed to prepare some questions for the job interview. As soon as everybody is ready (5 min.), the interview starts. The directors in turn ask their questions to the 1st, 2nd, and the 3rd candidates. While the 1st candidate is being interviewed, other candidates stay outside the door waiting for their turn. In the end, the directors choose only one candidate explaining their choice.

2. The marketing company that you work for needs to save money because your competitors have increased their market share. You are going to discuss saving money through reducing catering costs. Student A thinks that a good and easy way to reduce the costs is to stop subsidizing the cafeteria. Student B does not agree and suggests installing vending machines for drinks. At the moment the drinks are for free [Richardson, Kavanagh, Sydes, 2008]. The students are supposed to persuade each other that their solution is the best.

The first role play is rather long, even though it allows more variability and choice, while the second is shorter and gives little freedom in terms of language behavior.

Summing up, role play is a powerful, effective, and valuable teaching method that helps achieve a lot of aims such as practicing different language issues, creating a favorable learning environment, and making classes more interactive and student-oriented, which makes role play great both for teachers and for trainers.

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