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Role Play Activities as a Tool to Develop Speaking Skills of Student's Aigerim Ayakeshova

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Түйін

Бұл жұмыс ағылшын тілі сыныптарында рөлдік ойындардың маңызын және олардың сөйлеу дағдысын дамытудағы маңызын ашып көрсетеді

Резюме

Это работа объясняет важность ролевых игр в классах языка в развитии навыков говорения.

Abstract. One of the main purposes of learning foreign languages, particularly English, which has become lingua franca in many parts of the world, is the ability to communicate effectively with other users of the target language. Teaching to communicate in real, everyday situations is very often neglected and students have little chance to practise ordinary language in class. Therefore, teachers ought to provide learners with opportunities to improve their speaking skills. The prime objective of this diploma paper is to investigate whether role-play activities contribute to developing students' speaking skills in the ELT classroom. This thesis consists of three chapters; the first two sections deal with a theoretical background and the third one focuses on implementing role-play activities in the classroom.

Key words: learning foreign languages; ELT classroom; theoretical background; play activities in the classroom

Introduction

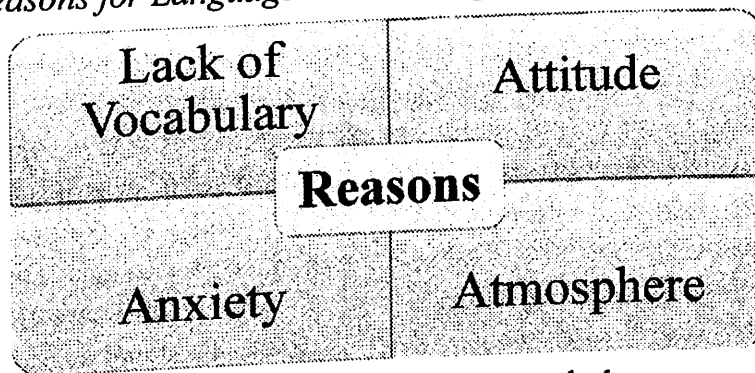
English language teaching is explored with immeasurable techniques and methods so far in EFL classroom. Every language instructor agrees that the most difficult and frustrating thing is making learners apply their knowledge in real life setting. In the classroom the learners are usually active and ready to practice the material, however, speaking the language outside the classroom is completely different and often students are lost in real communication as soon as they step outside the door. Huge amount of memorized words suddenly goes out of mind and becomes useless. It is of great importance to teach the language knowledge, but however it is not less important to consider the way this knowledge is taught.

According to my observations as the language instructor at several educational institutions I can say that learners hardly ever volunteer to respond to questions and

rarely give their personal opinion. Generally it is hard to make students give explicit answers when invited to speak. Although they seem enthusiastic about responding spontaneously, they often pause, hesitate or just keep silence. It is common to observe boredom that leads them turn to their L1. After some observations and literature review the following assumptions were considered:

- *Lack of vocabulary* leads learners to embarrassment. From my personal observations EFL students lack of confidence in their speaking ability since they feel they have not enough language skills to express exactly what they want to say;
- When language learning occurs the *attitude* to the language as to something complicated may lessen the speed of speaking skill acquisition;
 - *Anxiety* is the result of several factors as making mistakes, being criticized by teacher or being laughed by classmates.

Picture 2. Reasons for Language Learner's Speaking impairment.



Thus teachers are to guide and help learners to reach the success. New words and phrases can be taught in different ways, but the most effective ones to encourage learners to sustain their interest to the language can be enhanced through games. Using different types of communicative games for teaching speaking skills allows the teacher to be creative. Especially role-play games help teachers organize contexts in which the language is used purposefully and intended to develop speaking skills in real life settings. Learners can use language in a flexible and communicative way. With the help of role-plays it's easy to lessen the affective filter.

It is misleading to think that drama or role-play games can be considered as appropriate activity only among young learners. There is already a huge amount of activities created and developed by language instructors round the world. The more innovative ways the teachers uses, the more creative and intelligent learners will

become with more skills and abilities, which the teacher won't expect. They have huge learning potential and the teachers' task is to exploit this potential.

Any language learner appreciates the changeable atmosphere of learning. Consequently the teachers are to change and vary their teaching methodology. They should be more creative and imaginative with the syllabuses and lesson plans. This will result in students' acquiring more divergent levels of the foreign language.

This paper will try to show the benefits of role plays comparing previous studies and personal observations of the author. Moreover detailed suggestions and criteria on developing the efficient speaking task will be given.

First of all it is important to understand what speaking skill is and what specific features should be concerned when teaching it. Then the detailed overview on role plays and its implication in the classroom will be given in the second chapter.

I. Teaching Speaking Skills and its Complexity.

Objectives and aims of teaching language usually concern four basic language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. According to Widdowson [1] all the skills can be divide into two categories: receptive and productive. Reading and listening belong to receptive skills, whereas speaking and writing are classified as productive skills. Effective foreign language learning necessitates assimilation of all the four skills; hence SLA seems to be both quite a complicated and time-consuming process. Considered to be productive skills, writing and speaking involve language production. If uttering sounds enables learner to communicate, writing gives opportunity to communicate in a written form. However, Penny Ur notes the superiority of speaking skills: "(...) of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign languages learners are primarily interested in learning to speak" [2]. Ergo, it is obvious that speaking involves wide range of language aspects, what makes this skill difficult and complicated to be perceived. Moreover, teaching and learning speaking requires a great deal of practice and exposure. Nowadays, many people identify fluency in speaking with the most desirable ability in their target language, for being able to talk smoothly with a native speaker very often proves the actual linguistic level. Essentially, ability to speak a foreign language means having communicative efficiency. It is inconceivably difficult to imagine what life would look like if people could not communicate verbally. According to present time researches we can highlight Dakowska's [3] work, where she also claims that speaking became the

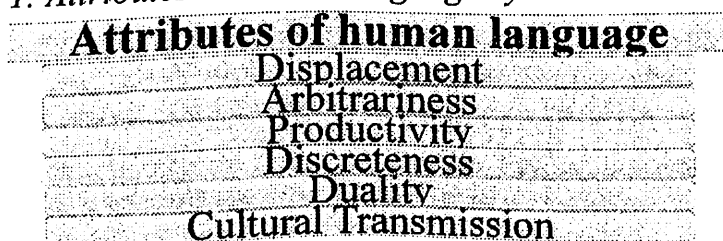
most emphasized skill in the foreign language teaching field and it is still recognized as the most difficult part of language teaching process since it is hard to develop speaking skills in the classroom setting. Especially, in the countries, where English is not the medium of communication, even encouraging using the target language in the class does not provide the learner with the real communication practice. It is true that some learners, however, try to put their knowledge in to practice outside the class, but the majority still do not even have this habit. This is the major drawback of teaching speaking in EFL classes.

Teaching speaking does not only require learner to communicate in target language but to interact with people in authentic setting appropriately. Hence, language instructors' main objective in teaching oral production skills is truly challenging and time consuming. However the current situation at schools shows that communicative efficiency of the learner is still not a priority. Golebiowska, Polish researcher, learners nowadays lack the possibility to talk to each other and teacher as well [4]. The same situation is observed in Kazakhstani EFL classes. As Assylbayeva [5] claims the minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers EFL learners are usually poor at spoken English, especially regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions, and understanding of cultural pragmatics.

In order to communicate in a foreign language learner is to acquire range of linguistic elements which are crucial for successful interaction. But firstly, the term "communication" has to be clearly defined. According to David Crystal communication is the transmission and reception of the information between source and receiver via signaling system: in linguistic contexts, source and receiver are interpreted as humans, the system involved is a language, and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance. In theory, communication is said to have taken place if the information received is the same as the sent [6].

According to Yule's work [7] there are six crucial attributes of human language.

Picture 1. Attributes to human language by Yule.



The first attribute is displacement that enables language users to discuss things not present at the moment of communication. Second feature is arbitrariness, which

shows the absence of relationship between linguistic form and the meaning of a word, since it is totally arbitrary. For instance, it is a complicated thing to deduce the meaning of the word wardrobe from only the form for a novice language learner. The other aspect, productivity, gives the knowledge that the amount of utterances in any human language is immense and infinite. The fourth subgroup of human language is discreteness that signals the user about the importance of the distinctions among the sounds of language. The next feature of the system offered by the author is language duality. According to this feature users get notified that language is organized at two levels. Finally, cultural transmission informs us that while physical features such as face shape or the eye colour may be inherited, a language cannot. Children are born with an innate capacity to acquire language, but they do not have a genetic predisposition to acquire a specific one.

According to this system, Yule [7, 169] defines language knowledge as the general ability to use the language accurately, appropriately and flexibly as communicative competence. Beyond question, linguistic knowledge about the notion of communication and then about a language is very important when investigating teaching speaking a foreign language. The areas of communicative competence attempt to explain what knowledge about a target language a learner should possess.

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A successful speaking lesson is genuinely devoted to interaction between students, which can be achieved through successful speaking activities.

And it is of high priority to the teacher to be familiar with the main features of a beneficial oral practice. As Ur [2] claims it is not an easy task to achieve the possibility of every activity to be filled with learner talking time to the maximum. The only thing that teacher can do to promote speaking is to divide students into groups as it increases the amount of practice learners can get as well as the amount of speaking. Because of the small size of the group, the inhibition level is lowered and thus they become more encouraged to speak.

But it is worth to mention that learners feel more comfortable to speak in their L1 and teachers have to remind learners to use L2. Nevertheless, it is more natural for them to speak in their mother tongue than in the target language, thus teachers very often keep on reminding learners to use L2 [8]. This author also proposes that one student from each group should have the role of monitoring the rest of his peers and

remind them to speak only in the target language. Which in its turn leads to more student centered atmosphere in the classroom

Another characteristic of successful speaking task is in students' active participation. All students should get an opportunity to speak and it is worth to point out that the amount of time should be equally distributed, so that class does not become the stage for one. For this sake Dobson [8, 11] suggests assigning a group representative to be responsible for equal participation among peers.

Motivation also has a great influence on the effectiveness of a speaking task as it gives genuine concentration on its successful completion. In order to increase the level of motivation during the speaking task all the topics chosen should be interesting and suitable to the level, culture and age group of the students. For instance issues interesting for teenagers might not be of the same interest level for adult learners, thus they may not be as eager to speak as they could be. As far as it concerns language level, educators are to choose activities that are similar to students' level of linguistic competence, since tasks that require higher level of competence may result in demotivation and easy ones may not be of interest to the learner. Whereas, tasks with suitable level will give students possibility to express ideas and thoughts fluently and clearly.

2. What is role-play?

Role-play can be a very successful tool in the teacher's hands. As its prime goal is to boost students' interaction in the classroom, educators should not forget about incorporating such a speaking activity to reflect learners' theoretical knowledge of a language in practice.

For the reason that there is no one precise definition of role-play and various authors see it in a different way, the beginning of this chapter deals with three different explanations of this speaking exercise.

According to Porter-Ladousse (1987: 3), "role play activities range from highly-controlled guided conversations at one end of the scale, to improvised drama activities at the other; from simple rehearsed dialogue performance, to highly complex simulated scenarios." The author of these words puts a lot of emphasis on a wide scope of role-play activities. Such a speaking task may be a limited one and be supported by prepared cues, for example by dialogues; or, conversely, role-play might be an activity where students rather improvise than rely on the practised dialogue. Porter-Ladousse also points out that role-play may differ in complexity, that is, some performances may be very short and simple, whereas some utterances may be very structured. The difficulty of the activity depends, therefore, on the language level.

Another definition is proposed by Scrivener:

In role-play, learners are usually given some information about a „role“ (e.g. a person or a job title). These are often printed on „role cards“. Learners take a little preparation time and then meet up with other students to act out small scenes using their own ideas, as well as any ideas and information from the role cards. A simple role card could do nothing more than name the role e.g. mother, detective or alternatively they could offer guidance as to what to do rather than the role itself, e.g. buy a train ticket to Brighton (Scrivener 2005: 155).

It is clearly stated that students are assigned particular roles to play. Scrivener also has it that role cards have an important function, thus, thanks to them learners are equipped with crucial information about their roles. Guidelines put on such cards help students in conveying important facts about their characters to be played and also make the speakers feel more secure, as basic clues are included on paper. The weaker learners may base their utterances only on a card, while the strong ones find role cards as prompts. A good set of role cards is frequently designed so that the participants may have different points of view and obvious disagreements (Scrivener 2005: 156). This author also inclines that students need an appropriate amount of time to prepare ideas and language before playing their roles. What is more, he says that learners not only use the ideas put on role cards, but also try to add any language they possess.

Gołębiowska (1987: 13) indicates that in role-play learners are given a task to complete and in order to do it, they are told who they are, what their opinions are, and what they know that is unknown to the other students. She stresses the fact that students are told who they are, namely, that they play the role of somebody else. Being cast in a role of a different character may diminish the fear of speaking, as these are not the speakers who make mistakes, but the personalities played by them. The key feature of role-play is that learners can become anyone they want for a short time. Their task is to pretend a different person and it may be, for example, a doctor, a pop star, a parent, a millionaire, etc.

3. Types of role-play

It has been mentioned that role-play may differ in length and in difficulty. There are also two different types of role-play, that is to say, real-plays and surreal-plays.

A role-play activity which is a rehearsal for the real world is called real-play (Al-Arishi 1994: 339). Therefore, textual material should be authentic, realia may be brought into the classroom. Moreover, real-playing fits in the desire for realism because it gives students the chance to practise typical activities they will probably perform in real life; these are: ordering food in a restaurant, greetings, asking for directions, booking holidays at a travel agency, etc. Thanks to that kind of role-playing, learners have a possibility to rehearse these activities and then, in the future,

they may have fewer problems because they have practised in the classroom. Still, in the issue of real-playing, Scrivener (2005: 158) figures that one of learners plays himself or herself, but in the context other than a room where they are taught. Interestingly, the author implies that this type of role-play is especially useful or business for professional people. Next, Scrivener adds that speakers may create their own real-play cards rather than being given a set of prepared ones.

In sharp contrast to real-play, surreal-play should encourage an imaginative self-expression of the inner world of each student's mind (Al-Arishi 1994: 337). While real-play seeks approval for believing that a classroom can become the real world, surreal-playing calls for promoting an expression of thoughts and feelings of each student's mind. Such an activity is also called imaginative role-playing. As stated by Doff (1988: 240), not only children fantasize, but also teenagers and adults often imagine themselves in different situations. In this case, teachers let students do what they naturally find enjoyable.

Role-play and simulation

The distinction between role-play and simulation is very often of small attention and even omitted. These speaking activities may often overlap in practice and different authors give different definitions, but, regardless of role-play and simulation similarities, one should remember that there is a difference.

According to Dakowska (2005: 111), the contrast between these two speaking activities is a matter of degree. In simulations, students are usually invited to participate in an exercise which resembles a real-life event. Unlike role-plays, in which role cards tell the learner what to say and what view to adopt, in simulations learners have the freedom to respond as they think (Dummett 1994: 41). The author clearly states that in a simulation the players are not restricted to what to say. Next, Dummett also suggests that students do not take any roles, but they imagine themselves in different, existing in actual life situations. In almost the same way, Harmer (2012: 121) sees simulation as "a chance to rehearse real-life encounters. For example, we can move the classroom furniture so that we represent a station office with a ticket window." This situation requires playing a role of a passenger and a travel clerk, so one learner likewise in a role-playing, must take on a role of somebody else.

As presented above, the distinction is not clear and it could be only proposed that in role-plays students are cast roles of different characters, whereas in simulations players do not take any roles and play themselves in real-life situations.

4. Implementing Role-Play In The Lessons

Organisation

This project was conducted in Lower Secondary School number 1 in Leszno. The aim of this research was to observe whether implementing role-play activities during English lessons develops students' speaking skills. The research was carried out among one group of sixteen participants aged fifteen, who were in the second grade of a lower secondary school at a pre-intermediate level. The project took place on the days when the teacher had two lessons in a row with the same group of students. Such an arrangement of classes made it possible to organize the research in a way that the first lesson was the preparation for the target activity, role-play, which was held during the second lesson. The participants took part in the lessons actively, they were engaged in the topics and were disciplined. They were also enthusiastic about the idea of that kind of a speaking activity and eager to cooperate with their friends during role-play.

Data collection tools

Three types of data collection tools were used during the sequence of six lessons: a questionnaire for the students an observation sheet for the mentor teacher and the teacher's observations.

Preliminary questionnaire

Before starting the research, the teacher conducted a preliminary questionnaire to find out whether the students were familiar with role-play and to get the students' general views on speaking skills.

The answers to the first question, namely, which language skill causes the most difficulties were varied: five students claimed that speaking was the most difficult one, four that it was grammar that caused a lot problems, and finally, three learners claimed that listening was the most difficult language skill. All the students agreed that developing speaking skills during English classes was necessary. When asked about the degree of difficulty in communicating in English, almost all the students circled that the difficulty depended on the topic of the conversation and only three learners admitted that communication in English caused no problems for them. For fourteen students role-play was a known activity, whereas when asked if they liked role-playing, only ten answered they liked such a kind of activity and three claimed that they sometimes liked role-playing. It turned out that thirteen learners would like to develop their speaking skills through role-playing. When asked about exemplary topics of role-play, they suggested, for example: at a restaurant, at a travel agency, in a bank, paying for clothes in a shop.

The results of the questionnaire assured the teacher that, indeed, speaking in English causes the biggest problems to learners and that speaking is considered a necessary skill. Moreover, the questionnaire was helpful because the teacher learnt that almost all of the students were familiar with role-play and eager to develop speaking

through role-playing. In addition, the teacher had a possibility to learn which topics the students would like to cover during the research project, which turned out to be quite an important hint.

Conclusions

An inspiration for this diploma paper occurred to the teacher when she had preliminary teaching practice in September in lower secondary school. The educator observed that speaking skills are neglected in Polish schools. Most teachers put emphasis on grammar and vocabulary exercises and they forget about so important speaking skills.

The aim of this paper was to examine whether role-play activities develop students' speaking skills. In order to check it, research in a lower secondary school among sixteen students was carried out.

First of all, the research revealed that implementing role-play activities develops students' speaking skills. Such a task is more appealing to the learners because they find it funny to play someone else's role. The majority of the students claimed that they felt that their speaking skills increased. What is interesting, the learners told the teacher that when they used English during an ordinary lesson, some of them felt stressed and intimidated. The teacher also observed that when conducting the research lessons almost all of the students were really involved in the exercises. Compared to the lessons the teacher had with the class before starting the research, during the research lessons, the students tried their best to get into the roles and use only English (although there were always some students who despite being told three times not to use Polish they would continue doing so). Furthermore, some students claimed that they had overcome their fear of speaking because they had quite much time devoted only to speaking in the target language. To add more, the learners also liked the fact that they could move in the classroom when, for example, visiting travel agencies. Also, working in pairs and groups was appealing to the students, because they could overcome their fear of speaking in front of people with whom they did not have a close relationship.

Altogether, role-play seems to be an efficient speaking exercise and teachers should not forget to implement such an exercise from time to time. What the students told the teacher after finishing the last research lesson was that such a type of task had many benefits but having such an exercise during each week might be a little boring and predictable for the students.

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