

Beyond Roleplay: Simulation and RPG for Language Learning

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Abstract

Roleplay is a popular activity that many EFL writers recommend, and many EFL teachers also agree that it has great promise. However, roleplay is not often used in EFL classes for several reasons, among them the spotty success rate of the activity. In addition, even if the roleplay is successful, there are doubts about the language learning that results from the one-off, stand-alone roleplay activity. This paper suggests a possible alternative: simulation/RPG (roleplaying game), sometimes known as live RPG, and gives some indications on how to implement it in the EFL classroom. It gives suggestions on how to insure a higher success rate for the basic roleplay activity, and then recommends expanding the idea of roleplay into the simulation/RPG activity to allow for extension of the English-using simulated world, elaboration of the students' selected roles, and expansion of the language learning experience.

Introduction

Jason White in *Mask & Gavel Vol.1* wrote on the value of using roleplays in language teaching, first explaining the differences among the terms simulation, roleplay, and improvisation, and then suggesting some roleplaying activities (White, 2012). This article looks into the same areas but ends at a different place—roleplaying is considered a good activity (albeit spotty in success rates), but often there is something missing in the connection between roleplaying and language learning. This article suggests an alternative: the simulation/RPG (roleplaying game), sometimes known as live RPG.

Definition of Roleplay

What is roleplay? H. D. Brown (2001) defines roleplay as “ a) giving a role to one or more members of a group, and b) assigning a purpose or objective that participants must accomplish” (p.183). Tompkins (1998) defines simulation as being like roleplaying, but more complex, and often including roleplaying. RPG (role playing game) is a game where the characters can be involved in a roleplay either live (live

RPG), as a boardgame (like Dungeons and Dragons), or digitally as computer software or online. All use roleplay as the basis.

Using Roleplays in EFL Classrooms

Many teachers who write about roleplay in the classroom strive to show why roleplays are useful, and do a good job at it. However, why is roleplay not a central part of every oral communication class? Eric Bray, author of the popular roleplaying textbook *Moving on with English*, states very clearly the problem with using roleplay in the language classroom. He writes, "doing a roleplay can elicit excitement as well as fear in the hearts of students and teachers alike. Why? Because unlike more controlled language-learning activities, roleplays can either be a lot of fun or fail miserably" (2010, p. 13). This possibility of "failing miserably" makes roleplay a high risk activity for teachers. This brings up two questions:

1. What can cause roleplays to fail?
2. How can teachers insure that roleplays are successful?

Bray gives some indication of why roleplay fails in Japanese EFL classes: "Japanese students may opt for silence rather than publicly make errors. Conversely, if their ability level is high, their silence may be due to a reticence to shine and stand out from their peers." In addition, roleplays are not a usual part of Japanese EFL classes, so students may not be used to doing them. Actually, the answers to the two questions are related. There are suggested criteria for doing roleplays, and if these criteria are ignored, the roleplay is apt to fail. Starting with a basic criteria, according to White, "The most successful role-play activities will be those that stimulate student interest and also connect with familiar settings." (White, 2012, p. 36). Bray, in a very practical article, includes this advice:

1. Take into consideration cultural factors.
2. Take into consideration language learning experiences and ability level.
3. Insure that students are initially successful to lay the groundwork for later activities.
4. Prepare the students before the roleplay:
 - a. Start with discussions with students (topic, details, moving of classroom furniture to create scene, etc.)
 - b. Have students do creative projects related to roleplays (make a menu for a restaurant roleplay).
 - c. Give students an overview of the roleplay (situation, roles, problem, and useful language).
5. Have a student act as manager/supervisor outside of the roleplay.
6. Include a problem.
7. Encourage the use of body language.
8. Have students use props.
9. The teacher should give supervision and feedback.
10. Encourage creativity.
11. Encourage stubbornness. (Japanese students tend to quickly compromise which quickly ends the roleplay, so encouraging them not to compromise quickly makes for longer, more complex, and more interesting roleplays.)
12. Encourage students to take or create challenging roles.
13. Repeat the roleplay for more language practice and for better roleplays.
14. The teacher should join in.

15. Let students create the roleplays.
16. Do a final feedback session with the whole class.
17. Video record the roleplays.
18. Have students reflect on results.

One problem with roleplays is the same problem with all EFL activities—they finish, the students go on to the next activity, and the lessons of the previous activity are forgotten.

If teachers follow these suggested criteria, their roleplays are more likely to be successful.

However, even when the roleplay activity is successful, does this mean that language learning is taking place or is happening in the most effective way? Not necessarily. One problem with roleplays is the same problem with all EFL activities—they finish, the students go on to the next activity, and the lessons of the previous activity are forgotten. One possible solution is to extend the roleplay over a longer period of time. This possible solution is described below.

Beyond Roleplays: Simulation/RPG

Simulation/RPG (also called live RPG) is one way to extend the roleplay activity. Scarcella and Crookall (1990) discuss simulation and second language acquisition using three learning theories:

1. Students are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input in the simulation
2. Students are actively involved in the activity
3. Students have positive attitudes about the activity. (described in Krish, 2001)

The simulation/RPG could run over the course of a month, a semester, or a year. Unlike roleplays, with which students have little experience, RPGs (roleplaying games) are very popular among Japanese students, so there should be considerable interest in this kind of activity.

Although some RPGs are inappropriate for language teaching, such as the shooting games, battle games, or games like Resident Evil, known as Biohazard in Japan (although students may enjoy playing zombies), there are some simulations that would be very appropriate. One such type of appropriate simulation would be similar to the Simcity computer game series. In Simcity, one player becomes mayor of a city, and tries to create a successful city by making good decisions. The decisions have consequences that are determined by the software.

To make this computer simulation into an interesting EFL activity, rather than one player, all students in the class become players in the simulation. Each student creates his or her own character and develops the character's life story over the span of the simulation.

There are two models of simulations, the convergent model and the divergent model described in this table (Tompkins, 1998):

Convergent model	Divergent model
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"This is the problem; How shall we solve it?"	This is the situation; What will we do?"
The action has a "past."	The action takes place "on stage."
Roles are given in detail.	Roles have no constraints.
The organizer processes the action.	No formal steps or sequences.
Focus on "what will happen?"	Focus on what the players do.

The convergent model is more focused and is more restricted in the roles and goals. The divergent model is more free form with less constraints.

Implementing RPGs in Language Teaching

How does a teacher implement simulations in the classroom? Cummings and Genzel (1990) state that the first step in designing a simulation is to decide upon game criteria. To help with this, it would be good to keep in mind Skehan's (1998) four criteria for task-based instruction: meaning is primary; there is a goal which needs to be worked towards; the activity is outcome-evaluated; and there is a real-world relationship. (cited in Tompkins, 1998) The possible role of learners in simulations can be active, having control over the situation, roles, and direction of the simulation, according to Scarcella and Oxford's (1992) "tapestry approach" (cited in Tompkins, 1998).

It would be too difficult to jump from the typical EFL classroom activities straight to simulation/RPG. It is a good idea to follow much of the advice that Bray gives to prepare Japanese students for roleplaying (see above). When the class gets to the actual simulation, they can also do the activity in stages. The first stage could follow the convergent model, with more things decided by the teacher. At a later stage or at higher levels of student competence and experience, the freer form in the divergent model could be used. In this way, students go from good, but short roleplays, extend them to restricted convergent model simulation/RPG, and at some point move to the divergent model. At this point students would have more freedom in creating the parameters of the simulation and their roles, and where the language use is more free, more natural—the goal of most EFL conversation classes.

Conclusion

Doing simulations/RPGs may be new for teachers and may be a little difficult to implement, but there are so many possible rewards. As Falk and Davenport (2004) state about live RPGs as games:

Live role-playing (LRP) games stand as powerful metaphorical models for the various digital and ubiquitous forms of entertainment that gather under the term pervasive games. Offering what can be regarded as the holy grail of interactive entertainment – the fully immersive experience. (p. 127)

Their terms, “pervasive games” and “the fully immersive experience” sound like descriptions of excellent language teaching activities. Falk and Davenport (2004, p. 127) go on to describe simulation/RPGs as “emergent, improvised, collaboratively and socially created, and have the immediacy of personal experience.” This also sounds like the kind of activity that language teachers are searching for.

This article is just an indication of a new direction in implementing roleplay in the language classroom. Obviously, more concrete steps need to be delineated to make simulation/RPGs easy to use in EFL classes, and more likely to be successful language learning activities. In addition, commercial text materials need to be developed that will make the procedure easier to understand by both teacher and students, and will make simulation\RPGs as ubiquitous in the EFL classroom as the digital RPGs are in Japanese society.

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