

# Book Reviews

## Starting Off with Role Play and Discussion

[Eric Bray. Nan'Un-Do, 2019. Pp.84. 2,000+tax ISBN: 9784523178781.]

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Around 2015, as the coordinator of a college English language program for English majors, I was looking for an oral communication book for second-year students. I was looking for something specific: the specialty of the department was an emphasis on performance in front of an audience, so a performance-based textbook that included language instruction with a lot of practice was best. I found the book! *Moving on with English: Discussion, Role Plays, Projects* (Nan'Un-Do) by Eric Bray (2007) fit all the desired criteria. The book worked well for a few years and students enjoyed creating, practicing, and performing role plays. Unfortunately, the college, which was a faculty within a university, was disbanded at the end of the 2017 academic year, so, of course, we had to stop using the book.

In 2020, in a chance discussion on Zoom with the author of the textbook, Eric Bray, I found that a second edition of the book, retitled, had been published in 2019: *Starting Off with Role Play and Discussion*. The following is a description and evaluation of the new textbook. Although I have not had a chance to use this particular textbook, I am basing this

review on my several years of using the first edition of the book and my professional views of good textbooks.

### **Description of the Book**

The book is A4-size with a colorful cover. (See Figure 1.) Attached to the back of the last page is a CD of model conversations and useful phrases for each unit. The book is basically black and white with some blue sections and text and gray-scale photos and illustrations. There are 83 pages containing 14 units of discussion/role play, with the fifteenth unit as a review of the past 14 units. In addition, after every two units there are short review pages. Table 1 shows the arrangement.

### **Figure 1**

*Cover of Starting Off with Role Play and Discussion.*



**Table 1**

*Units and Reviews*

Pages	Units
5 pages	Unit 1 – You and Your Classmates
4 pages	Unit 2 – You, Going Out to Eat
1 page	Units 1 & 2 Review and Reflection
4 pages	Unit 3 – You, Shopping
4 pages	Unit 4 – You, Out on the Town
1 page	Units 3 & 4 Review and Reflection
4 pages	Unit 5 – You, Planning a Trip
4 pages	Unit 6 – You, Hotel Guest
1 page	Units 5 & 6 Review and Reflection
5 pages	Unit 7 – You, World Traveler
5 pages	Unit 8 – You, Living with Others
1 page	Units 7 & 8 Review and Reflection
5 pages	Unit 9 – You, Job Hunting
6 pages	Unit 10 – You, Giving Good Advice
1 page	Units 9 & 10 Review and Reflection
5 pages	Unit 11 – You, Solving World Problems
5 pages	Unit 12 – You, Inventor for the Future
1 page	Units 11 & 12 Review and Reflection
4 pages	Unit 13 – You and Older People in Your Life
6 pages	Unit 14 – You, Making Your Own Role Play
1 page	Units 13 & 14 Review and Reflection
5 pages	Unit 15 – Review and Practice

As can be seen by the unit titles, the textbook is arranged in a situational syllabus manner which place the student into a variety of situations.

**Formats**

This textbook contains a variety of types of unit and so the following describes each type.

### ***The Format of Unit 1***

This unit is composed of some usual ice-breaking activities. It culminates in a guessing game and is not a typical unit. It could be easily replaced by the teacher's own favorite tried-and-true ice-breaking activities.

### ***The Format of a Typical Unit: Units 2-10***

A typical unit is 4-6 pages long and is made up of four activities, each activity containing one or two tasks, making this a task-based textbook. Here is a description of the activities and tasks for "Unit 2 – You, Going Out to Eat":

#### *Activity I Discussion Preparation and Discussion*

Activity 1 is a set of questions on the topic of the unit; in this case the questions are about the student's experiences of going out to eat. The task is for the student to first write an additional question, think about the questions, write answers to the questions, and finally discuss the questions with a partner or in small groups. The very first page of the textbook just before the table of contents is a page with 26 useful expressions for discussion arranged in categories: giving your opinion, agreeing, clarifying, disagreeing, and general comments.

#### *Activity II Role Play Practice*

This activity is practice for doing the role play. In this case, the first task is for students to look at a sample menu and a model conversation. In small groups, students are asked to practice the model conversation which is included on the CD. Afterwards, students modify the model conversation and the server is asked to write down the order on a sample blank order form.

#### *Activity III Role Play Preparation*

This activity requires the students to prepare their own original role play. In this case, the first task asks the students in groups to decide on the kind of restaurant they would like and decide on the name of the restaurant. In the second task, the students have to create a restaurant menu. When they finish with their menu, they have to practice being the server and customer, using the model conversation as a base.

### *Activity IV Role Play*

In this activity students do the role play several times. The first task is to do the role play in your group, but with a twist that is quite interesting: the description of the customer includes seven different personality types and situations, with a space to add an extra one. Each customer chooses one personality type/situation and plays that part without telling anyone which they choose. The server also has seven personality types and situations with a space for an extra one and then chooses one without telling which one was chosen. After the role play, all members of the group guess which personality type and situation each actor portrayed. The second task is to perform the role play for another group, but only the student playing server, using his or her own group's restaurant name and menu, portrays the server for students from the other group. The unit works in that each activity prepares students for the next activity and the unit prepares students to create a successful role play.

### **The Format of a Review and Reflection Page**

After each even-numbered unit is a page that serves as both a review of the last two units and as a reflection of what students have learned. In the Units 1 & 2 Review and Reflection, there are three questions/tasks that students must individually write the answers:

1. What useful new words, conversational expressions, or grammatical/usage patterns did you learn from the textbook, your teacher, or classmates?
2. Write sentences of your own using the new words, conversational expressions, or grammatical/usage patterns you wrote above.
3. What else did you learn in this class about language, culture, etc.?

The review and reflection section helps students review what they learned in the previous two units and reflect on what else they learned about language and culture, a very valuable and unique feature.

### **The Format of the Last Role Play Unit**

In Unit 14, the last role play unit, the textbook asks students to create their own new role play on a new topic. Students in groups are asked to review all the role plays they have done so far and to come up with a new topic that they think would be useful to them in the future. They are then guided to come up with the following:

1. The situation
2. All the necessary materials
3. The useful language, and

4. The model conversation.

In groups they practice their role play. Then they perform their role play for another group. Students then evaluate the role plays using a format and rubric provided. This unit is a valuable innovation that can be added as a final stage in any role play project.

**The Format of Unit 15 – Review and Practice**

Unit 15 is a review and practice of all the previous units. The first task is a board game that can be played with a partner or another pair of students; that is, either in groups of two or four. The game board has squares that require the students to briefly discuss each of the 14 discussion topics and role plays they did. This is a very clever way of reviewing the contents of the book. The second task is to match terms in English with the definition in Japanese. Each of the four sets of 12 words or phrases come from three units, reviewing all the first 12 units. This goes against the spirit of the vocabulary component of each unit which allows students to create their individual vocabulary list. This activity would work better if it were incorporated into each unit or, better yet, deleted from the book. Alternatively, it could be added for each unit in a teachers guide.

**Evaluation of Textbook**

Looking at the textbook as a teacher considering using it for a course, it seems that it could be gone through quickly in a university oral communication course in one 15-week semester or gone through thoroughly with supplementation in one year. The whole book is good, with units 2-10 being extremely useful in real-life situations, but the units that caught my teacher eye were units 11-14 which seemed to be unique and that went beyond the utilitarian and entered the realm of creative and Big Idea units.

Below are the negative and positive points that could go into the decision of whether to use the book or not.

***Points Which Could be Improved***

I felt the following points could be improved.

1. Since most students no longer have access to a CD player, it would be a good idea to have easily downloadable sound files on the textbook's website.
2. The discussions are informal, and the textbook gives no guidance on the roles, role language, structure, and moves necessary for a good discussion. These items would have to be created by the teacher and distributed to students as supplemental materials.

3. The list of useful phrases for discussions is fine, but it would be better if students were required to use each phrase at least once and the phrases had boxes before or after them that could be checked each time the student used a phrase to encourage them to use the phrases repeatedly. Of course, this type of modified list could be used as a handout for students to hand in to the teacher.
4. At the end of all the roleplays in the textbook, on the last two pages of Unit 14, the textbook contains three ways to evaluate a role play and includes a seven-question self-evaluation form. It would be good if this information had been introduced earlier so that students would know how to act in a role play and what will be evaluated in their performance. These pages could have been placed as an appendix and then could have been referred to before and after each role play. Of course, the teacher could create such a rubric and self-evaluation form and have students complete it and hand it in after each performance.
5. Finally, as mentioned before, the last unit contains vocabulary for the whole book that is tested, but it is not clear where this vocabulary comes from and students may be surprised to be tested on these particular vocabulary items. Of course, the teacher can teach these items at the beginning of the unit and test them at the end of the unit.

### ***Good Points***

These are the elements that I really liked about the textbook.

1. The thing that most appealed to me was that the entire book was focused on preparing students to perform useful role plays.
2. The situations in the textbook are representative of a wide variety of common situations so the students will be motivated to explore these topics through discussion and role play.
3. The order of the four activities is logical and progresses from easy to difficult and simple to complex activities. The tasks break each activity into easily doable chunks.
4. The last question in each survey or personality/situation in a role play allows for input from the student and opportunities for the students to use their imagination.
5. The interesting structure of the role plays, with at least seven different personality/situations, allows for a wide variety of choices for the actors, ensuring that each role play will be distinctly different and makes it easier for the teacher and audience to sit through multiple performances of the same role play by different groups in the class.
6. The excellent one-page “Review and Reflection” pages help students to remember what

they did in the last few classes and reflect on what they have learned.

7. Giving the students a chance in Unit 14 to come up with an original role play situation allows them to exercise their creativity.
8. The review activity in Unit 15 that asks students to share their thoughts on the discussions and role plays of the whole book is better than a paper exam from a performance in education standpoint.
9. The review activity in Unit 15 that quizzes students on vocabulary items is a good characteristic of the textbook, especially if it includes the students' own vocabulary lists and is used before, during, and after each unit.
10. Finally, the publisher offers a teacher's manual which would give teachers not familiar with using role plays in their courses advice on how to do so. This manual would be much more valuable than is usually the case as this textbook requires the teacher to do activities that they may not be used to. (Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain a copy of the teacher's manual, so I cannot comment on its quality.)
11. Lack of full-color pages makes the book appear boring at first glance, but it does put the focus on the activities and role plays. A Japanese university language teacher once told me that colorful textbooks are interpreted as "children's books" by Japanese professors, so this judicious use of gray-scale photos and illustrations and blue sections and text make the book seem more serious than colorful textbooks. I count this as a positive characteristic.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the negative and positive points of *Starting Off with Role Play and Discussion*, and considering that each of the negative points could be offset by teacher-created materials, I have decided that I will definitely use it next year if face-to-face classes replace the present online ones.



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