Role-play Ideas for the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Role-play is an effective communicative activity that can be implemented in the foreign language classroom to increase enjoyment and success for EFL and ESL learners. Krish (2001) states that activities such as role-play are vital for developing communication skills. Furthermore, role-play provides opportunities for an increased amount of language production in a non-threatening environment. Role-play can also broaden the scope of the classroom to include the outside world and provide a wider range of language usage opportunities. In addition to the variety that role-play adds to the usual classroom activities, it also provides a change of pace (Budden, 2004). Another possible outcome is increased student motivation and lower anxiety levels for foreign language learners. Bray (2010) notes that role-play can "transform the atmosphere of a classroom" which leads to increased motivation and lower anxiety for students and teachers alike. There is a small risk involved with using role-play; however, the rewards far outweigh the risks. Rewards include fun and excitement in the classroom, genuine learning, useful skills acquisition, group cohesion, and a greater opportunity for learner autonomy. Role-play is essentially a lot of fun, and when learning is fun student learning and overall success is more likely.

Simulation, Role-play, and Improvisation

The terms simulation, role-play, and improvisation are often used interchangeably; however, they are actually different. Simulation is the common act of two or more students reciting a given dialogue that focuses on a specific scenario. Popular examples of simulation include ordering food at a restaurant, checking into a hotel, and asking for or giving directions. In simulation activities students are simply reinforcing the learned vocabulary and phrases through repetition of scripted dialogues.

Role-play is often used as an extension of simulation because students can use the same scenarios, but with role-play they are not given a scripted dialogue. Using simulation and role-play together can be an effective way of building speaking skills for foreign language learners. Many EFL textbooks have chapters or lessons that present a topic, provide a scenario with dialogue, and then as a final activity have the students role-play the same scenario with their books closed. The key difference between the two activities is the purpose. For role-play the purpose is to solve a problem or reach a specific goal. An example is having students deal with the situation where the food they ordered in the previous simulation is served cold when it should be hot.

Improvisation is similar to role-play except that the scenario is open-ended. An example of improvisation is two students pretend to be taking an exam and one of the students asks the first student for an answer. In this improvisation the first student has to decide how to respond to the second student's request. The second

student must then decide how to react to the first student's initial response. There are several interesting paths that this improvisation could take, such as the first student agreeing to help the second student cheat, or the students getting in an argument because the first student refuses. The improvisation could also be enhanced by adding a third participant as the students' teacher who catches them in the act.

Another fun improvisation is to have students pretend to be at a theme park like Universal Studios Japan or Tokyo Disneyland. The improvisation could go any number of directions depending on the choices made by the participants. With no scripted dialogue or defined scenario the participants could decide to go on a ride, have lunch, play some games, or leave. The key for improvisation is to only give the setting and not a specific goal to reach or problem to solve (which would make it a role-play exercise). Although they are different in specific content, simulation, role-play, and improvisation can be viewed as three points on the same scale because they are all dramatic techniques consisting of acting out different scenarios.

Components of Role-play

Role-play consists of three main components: the problem to be solved or goal to be accomplished, the situation or setting, and the characters involved in the scenario. The problem to be solved or goal to be accomplished can be taken from previous classroom topics, often found in the textbook, real life current events, or from popular stories, movies, television programs, and even songs. Ideally the problems or goals used for role-play should reflect useful, real life situations. For example, doing a role-play for Japanese elementary and junior high school students involving booking a hotel or checking in for a flight has a lower probability of success than other, more familiar, scenarios. The situation or setting should be something appropriate for the age level and familiar to the students if at all possible. For instance, restaurant scenarios are best if the restaurant is a place like McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken because almost every student will have eaten in these places before, sometimes on a regular basis. If the goal is to have students practice scenarios at an American-style restaurant then a scaffolding technique can be used where the students first practice role-play at familiar fast-food restaurants and then move on to Western-style restaurants. Some American restaurants such as the Outback can be found in Japan as well, so there is a good chance that at least a few students in any given class will have eaten there.

Important Steps in the Role-play Process

Before beginning any role-play exercise there are several important steps the teacher must perform. The first step is to build a positive classroom environment through various techniques such as the use of humour, pair and group activities, and demonstrating that the teacher truly cares about the students and their success. One specific strategy that seems to go a long way in creating a positive environment is for the teacher to show a willingness to take risks and laugh at him or herself. Because it takes time to build a positive environment it may be wise to wait a few class periods before attempting a role-play activity. Once the teacher has taken steps to build the positive environment, the next step is to create interest in the topic. There are several strategies that can create interest in a given topic, such as showing humorous film or television clips depicting the role-play scenario, or reading current news articles related to the topic. A wonderful example of using film clips is the scene from *Mr. Bean's Holiday* (2007) where Mr. Bean is at a French restaurant and does not realize what he has ordered. After his plate of seafood arrives he proceeds to deposit the raw oysters, which he finds disgusting, in the purse of the lady at the next table. After the students have viewed this scene, and have almost assuredly had a good laugh, the teacher can introduce a role-play exercise about getting the wrong food. One strategy to gauge the students' interest in a topic is to do an informal class discussion asking for ideas and feelings about

a topic. For example if the class consists of younger students there probably would not be much enthusiasm for scenarios involving travel, but a class of adult learners would respond very well to these role-plays. Another important step is to teach any important vocabulary or key phrases that may come up during the role-play exercise. Similarly, it is important to discuss any cultural differences that the

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students may not be aware of connecting to a particular role-play. One example related to the previously mentioned restaurant scenario is that people eating at American restaurants do not call out for their waiter as they do in Japan.

When these preparatory steps have been completed the teacher should demonstrate the role-play exercise together with a few of the stronger students. This will help to make the class more relaxed about performing the exercise. Using props whenever possible will also increase the likelihood of success. An example of using props is bringing in a bag of fries from McDonald's and having students role-play the scenario of the fries being cold and wanting to return them. Similarly, rearranging the classroom to facilitate a role-play can also increase the chances of success. For a role-play on asking for and giving directions, have the participants sit in chairs that are arranged to simulate taxi seats. This way the students avoid the face-to-face setting that may be uncomfortable for them. It is also easier to ask for directions from a taxi driver than a random person on the street.

The final step of any role-play involves the evaluation phase. After a role-play has been attempted it is paramount for the teacher to give positive feedback to all participants. At times this may be difficult if the role-play was unsuccessful, but there is always something positive that can be said even if it is something as simple as "good try" or "nice effort".

Possible Role-play Scenarios

The most successful role-play activities will be those that stimulate student interest and also connect with familiar settings. In addition to the previously mentioned restaurant and giving directions role-plays there are several other scenarios that are useful for foreign language students.

An easy role-play to start with is having students pretend they are meeting for the first time at a new school and they need help finding their classroom. This role-play can be combined to teach greetings and responses as well. The teacher can play the role of a homeroom teacher or even the principal who greets the students and then helps them find their classroom. If possible, students could go into the hallway outside the real classroom to make the role-play more authentic. Simple role-plays like this can be valuable when first introducing a class to the activity.

Another example is a scenario where two students role-play friends making plans for the weekend. Have the students sit back to back and use their cell phones instead of talking while facing each other. The excitement from being able to have their phones out in class will translate into more excitement and enthusiasm for the activity. Also, the comfort will be increased because the students have their phones to focus on instead of the daunting task of communicating in English.

Another creative and fun role-play is to have one of the students play the role of teacher dealing with a few rowdy students. The chairs can be arranged to simulate a private conference in which the teacher is reprimanding two students who caused a disruption during the lesson. More outgoing students will relish the chance to play the authority figure in a school setting, and it is very likely that the rest of the class will pay attention and enjoy this role-play.

Other enjoyable role-plays include family situations where the participants play various family members. Two close classmates could do a role-play as father and son or mother and daughter. A third class member could be added as a grandparent or a sibling. There is a plethora of scenarios involving family members that can be utilized, such as a father teaching a son to play baseball, a mother teaching her daughter how to put

on make-up, or siblings disagreeing about what show to watch on television. Props such as baseball gloves and make-up kits would add an element of believability and enjoyment to these role-plays as well.

An important point to keep in mind is that the teacher needs to present the role-play and then let the students do what they can with it. Practice the same scenario several times with different students if the exercise is going well. If it is not, join in the role-play and guide the students through the areas they are struggling with.

Role-play can be a valuable component of any EFL or ESL classroom if the teacher believes in the activity. Success may not come immediately, but through creative planning, practice, patience, and perseverance role-play can become an integral piece of any foreign language teacher's repertoire of class activities.

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