

The Effectiveness of a Role-Play Activity in Improving EFL learners' Communicative Skills

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Abstract: English is a language subject, and language teaching is usually carried out in the form of communication. Enhancing the effectiveness of teaching communicative skills is of great significance in promoting the improvement of EFL learners' English learning level. Role-play is a very vivid and interesting way of teaching, and its introduction into English communicative teaching can effectively enhance the enthusiasm of EFL learners' oral communication teaching and enhance the teaching effect. In view of this, this paper mainly takes the role-playing teaching method as an example, and briefly analyses how to realize the innovation of English teaching ability teaching.

Keywords: Role-Play Activity; Communicative Skills; Effectiveness.

1. Introduction

For half a century, the concept of communicative competence has been studied widely in different fields where interacting with other cultures is a central concern. In current China, more and more emphasis has been laid on the students' communicative competence. At present, the oral English level of EFL students is generally low, and they are not able to use English comfortably to talk with others, and most of them still have difficulties in expressing themselves and understanding others appropriately in English. In most schools, however, social etiquette, English literature and translation, and advanced pronunciation are optional courses, but in fact they do not have any practical value. In most cases, EFL learners do not focus on learning and mastering the content and knowledge of the courses just to get credit. Some teachers are still using the traditional indoctrination mode of teaching in a modern teaching environment, which is teacher-centred teaching. Rigid teaching can't make students fully arouse EFL learners' interest and enthusiasm. The cultivation of communication ability can't be achieved simply by rote memorization, but needs to be infiltrated into the practice and expression of different contexts through the explanation of knowledge in the process of English application.

Thus, finding an effective way to improve their communicative skills is of vital importance. It is a widespread notion in education research that learning occurs through playful activities (Boysen et al., 2022). Role-play is a communicative activity. In this activity, the teacher sets up a suitable situation according to the teaching content and objectives, and lets the students play different roles in the situation according to their own characteristics. The practical performance can stimulate EFL learners' interest in learning and consolidate their language knowledge. Therefore, this paper attempts to combine role-playing with communicative competence development, to study the effectiveness of role-play on EFL Learner's communicative competence development, to provide an effective method for the cultivation of EFL learners' communicative competence.

2. Concepts of Role-Play

2.1. Definition

A role can be described as several sets of behaviors grouped together (Turner, 2001). Role can exist in terms of how a person is marked through a society's cultural value, whether in a favorable light or not, and how they position themselves related to other individuals (Lynch, 2007). Role-play was originally pioneered by psychologist Moreno in the 1930s for the purposes of psychotherapy. It is a psychological technique that puts a person temporarily in another person's social position and acts according to the manner and attitude required by that position, in order to improve people's understanding of the social roles of other people and their own original roles, so that they can perform their roles more effectively. Due to the vividness and interactivity of role-play, it is now widely used in education, management and medical fields. According to Richard (1996), role-play is a classroom activity in theatre performance in which students take on different roles depending on the situation and act out words and behaviors according to the context and the identity of the character they are playing. For example, when practising how to express complaints and apologies in a foreign language, students can role-play. Penny (1990) believes that role-play is all about learners imagining what they are doing in a particular situation outside the classroom, and sometimes using appropriate language to take on roles other than their own, depending on the context. Role-playing is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models. These strategies emphasize the social nature of learning, and see cooperative behavior as stimulating students both socially and intellectually (Jarvis, Odell, & Troiano, 2002).

2.2. Categories of Role-Play

No uniform standard has been reached for the classification of role-playing method in English teaching. By analyzing the use of role-play in oral communication teaching, the author intends to classify the role-play method into the following two types.

2.2.1. Simulated Role-play and Creative Role-play

This criterion is categorized according to the need to use students' creativity in the process of role-play. Simulated role-

play and creative role-play. Simulation role-play is a classroom activity in which students are asked to play the roles of characters in a text according to the scenario of the text being learned, and to express the content of the text with words and actions. While creative role play is a classroom activity designed by the teacher based on the content of the text being learned in the context of real life. It provides students with a freer space for imaginative creativity.

2.2.2. Randomly Assigned Role-play and Pre-prepared Role-play

This categorization criterion takes into account the state of preparation prior to the role-play and whether roles have been assigned in advance. Randomly assigned role-play means that the roles are assigned randomly before the role-play is conducted, i.e., each student has an equal probability of being assigned to the same role. Such an assignment method is more common in daily English classroom teaching. Pre-prepared role-play means that the content of the role-play is pre-determined before the role-play activity is carried out, and the actors for each role have been chosen in advance. When the role-play is conducted formally, each student knows his or her own role, who will play the different roles, and the order in which they will appear.

2.3. The Major Steps of Role Play

2.3.1. Creating Scenarios

The purpose of creating scenarios is to enable students to relate the language they use to a specific situation, because only in this way will they feel that the language they are practising is very useful in their lives and, when they are practising roles with which they are familiar in their mother tongue, will they really see the role-play as a stage on which to display their personality, rather than as a mechanical tool for practising the language.

2.3.2. Group Discussion on Assigning Roles

Learners will be divided into groups, with one student elected by the students or appointed by the teacher to be the leader of the group, who will be responsible for organizing the allocation of roles to the students in the group, discussing the design of lines, and how to set up the scene. Assign a student with good English foundation to write lines, and then discuss them in small groups, so as to fully realize the exchange of information between teachers and students, and activate the thinking of students and teachers.

2.3.3. Demonstrations

Give a demonstration. Be sure to make it clear to the students what they are supposed to do. Demonstrations can be done by the teacher and a student who is clear about the rules.

2.3.4. Rehearsal Preparation

At this stage, communication is made as authentic as possible by encouraging students to move around the class and to use gestures, facial expressions and objects as appropriate.

2.3.5. Performance

A performance is the successful presentation of the results of a learner's endeavors on a "stage". Teachers can guide students to participate in the performance voluntarily and not force them to perform in the class because some students need a longer time to build up their confidence to perform in front of lots of audience. When performing, students can use language skills to express themselves in different roles and incorporate their feelings and understanding of the characters.

2.3.6. Feedback

Teachers can organize all students to comment on the performance of the previous groups. Points for discussion include voice, intonation, movement, creativity, sentence patterns, richness of vocabulary use, etc. In this way, students' performances are fed back to them in a timely manner, so that they can understand their own progress and enhance their self-confidence.

3. Application of Role Play in Oral Communication Teaching

The teaching of oral communication in English refers to the teaching in which students participate in interactive exercises and meaningful communication under the guidance of the teacher so as to develop their oral communication skills. The teaching of oral communication in language has several characteristics: Firstly, the main purpose of teaching oral communication in English is to develop communicative competence, especially oral communication, which means that students not only speak sentences that conform to grammatical rules. Moreover, they should know when, where and to whom to utter these sentences. Secondly, the teaching of oral communication in English emphasizes the development of learners' oral communication skills through engaging students in interactive exercises and meaningful communication, rather than through mechanical language training and language drills.

Therefore, role-play activities can provide learners' plenty of opportunities to communicate, to apply what they have learned in specific scenarios, so as to enhance their communicative skills. Taking the example of the hearing board of Unit 4 Cultural Heritage in the compulsory second English of the PFP version of high school as an example, it specifically illustrates the application of creative role-play in oral communication.

3.1. Creating Scenarios

The topic is "Participation in International Youth Cultural Heritage Preservation Project". The scenario is that if you and your group are participating in the Youth Programme and you meet British students visiting Mount Tai. They don't know much about the culture of Mount Tai, you need to introduce Mount Tai to the British students in English, so that they can learn more about the culture of Mount Tai.

3.2. Group Discussion on Assigning Roles

Randomly assigned and creative role-play will be applied in this lesson. Learners will be divided into groups, with one student elected by the students or appointed by the teacher to be the leader of the group, who will be responsible for organizing the allocation of roles to the students in the group. The roles are assigned randomly before the role-play is conducted and the requirement of performance are that use language, beliefs, and experiences on this topic. Learners are divided in groups of four. Two international tourists and two students tour guides.

3.3. Demonstrations

In order to make the activity go smoothly, the teacher gives appropriate hints to the students and even demonstrates the possible scenarios and the language to be used. For example, the "guides" can give "tourists" an overview of Mount Tai, and the interaction with the tourists reflects an awareness of

the need to protect cultural heritage.

3.4. Rehearsal Preparation

Learners are clear about the requirements and then rehearse in the allotted time, with the teacher providing guidance for each group.

3.5. Performance

Groups take turns to perform while other groups watch carefully and take notes.

3.6. Feedback

Teachers inform students of evaluation criteria in advance, which includes pronunciation, intonation, expression, whether the communication is fluent, and whether the communication strategies are reasonably used. In order to ensure the active participation of students, the author invoked the competition scoring mechanism to let students carry out group mutual evaluation. The results proved that the measure did stimulate the students' enthusiasm, and the performances everywhere reflected the students' rich imagination and great creativity.

In role-playing activities, students are not provided with arranged dialogues and scripts. Teachers help students to fulfil their tasks by creating scenarios and requirements for the students and by giving them appropriate prompts. This allows students to express themselves freely using the language forms they have learned.

4. The Effectiveness of Role Play on Improving EFL Learners' Communicative Skills

In real life, listening and speaking are always in integration, so teachers should teach these two skills in an interacted way (Tavil, 2010). Role-play is a kind of teaching method based on the theme of teaching, guided by the teacher, with the participation of several students to achieve learning and communication. Role-play facilitate transformative learning, using their strength in evoking their participant's imagination, new scenarios, and emotional immersion (Winardy & Septiana, 2023). Compared with traditional teaching methods, role-play is more interesting and vivid, and can effectively stimulate EFL learners' interest in learning. In the process of role-play activities, students need to put language knowledge into specific situations, which can better exercise the spoken language, deepen the understanding of language knowledge, and obtain the development of language learning ability. It can be seen that role-play is a very effective teaching method, and the advantages of its application in the improvement of communicative skills are specifically manifested in the following aspects.

Different roles can enable effective treatment of different subjects or situations. Acting in class is one of the most effective ways to engage students, and the application of role-playing will initiate and maintain learning (Baruch, 2006). Students are able to revel in simulated environments, such as phone calls and various daily conversations, etc. Games are a great way to stimulate students' interest in teacher-student and student-student interaction, which not only helps students perceive cultural differences between different regions and experience various cultural values. For example, teachers can use performance-based classroom activities to simulate real-life scenarios in the classroom, allowing students to play roles

and engage in activities such as greeting each other, making phone calls, and giving birthday gifts; having students simulate a British person receiving a guest people. This can be done outside of the classroom or improvised and then commented on to see if the performance is in keeping with the British way of life. These activities can not only create a learning-friendly classroom atmosphere, but also activate EFL learners' learning enthusiasm for the participation and engagement of intercultural activities, so that students can accumulate communicative experience, improve their ability to adapt to the culture.

4.1. The Effectiveness of Role Playing on EFL Learners' Interest in Oral Communication

English oral communication teaching helps to enhance learners' interest in learning English. Interest plays an important role in English learning and is the prerequisite and foundation for students to learn English. Research shows that students with strong interest in learning tend to have stronger English learning ability, and students with high English proficiency also have higher interest in learning English. Only when students are highly involved in English teaching activities can good teaching results be achieved. Thus, in English teaching, teachers should take the cultivation of EFL learners' learning interest as an important task, and enhance the attraction of the English classroom to the students through the innovation of teaching mode and method to stimulate and cultivate learners' learning interest. Role play develops EFL learners' communicative competence, that is, their ability to use the language practically. It emphasizes the practicality and use of language. When students find they are able to use English freely in practice, they will feel enjoyable, proud and satisfied, and then feel that learning English is useful and full of interest in English. Then, they will put more energy and time into their learning afterwards.

4.2. The effectiveness of Role Play on Improving EFL learners' Communicative skills

Language Communication emphasizes the important role of authentic communicative activities in the development of EFL learners' oral communicative competence, and stresses the need for students to develop their oral communicative competence by engaging in authentic and meaningful interactions and exchanges. Through role play, students can use language skills to express themselves in different roles and incorporate their feelings and understanding of the characters. It is generally believed that oral communication competence, like communicative competence, consists of "linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence". The three competencies together constitute EFL learners' oral communication competence and are indispensable. Among them, linguistic competence is "the prerequisite and foundation for the development of oral communication competence, pragmatic competence is the core of oral communication competence, and strategic competence is the enabler for the development of oral communication competence".

4.3. The effectiveness of Role Play on Improving EFL learners' Communicative strategies

The concept of communicative competence has evolved a

lot. Council of Europe considers that there are six components in communication skills: language skills, socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence, socio-cultural competence, strategic competence and social competence (Muste, 2016). EFL learners are involved in role-play different communicative strategies to help the communication flow. Communicative strategies can be divided in many categories according to different scholars, message reduction and alteration strategies, non-verbal strategies, socio-emotional strategies, fluency-oriented strategies and so forth are the most common used.

learners in the role-play process can be flexible according to the situation, characters, communication process and other factors to choose suitable and appropriate communication strategies to ensure the smoothness and fluency of communication. For instance, non-verbal strategies can be used in the process of role play. It refers to methods of achieving communicative goals through eye contact, gestures, or facial expressions. Fluency-oriented strategies refers to that speakers who adopt fluency-oriented strategies focus on the rhythm, intonation, pronunciation and clarity of speaking English in order to improve the other's understanding. They also consider the context of the dialogue and slow down their speaking speed. By actively applying these communicative strategies in the process of role play, learners can improve the development of students' English application ability and promote the continuous improvement of EFL learners' oral communication ability, so as to lay a solid foundation for the development of comprehensive English language communicative ability.

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