

The Effectiveness of Role-Play Activity in Practicing EFL Learner's Communicative Skills

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Abstract: The constant development of the world makes the status of communicative skills more and more significant. And the new curriculum standard also emphasizes the cultivation of students' comprehensive language use ability. As a kind of dramatic classroom activity, role-play activity can dramatize the static knowledge of language and culture and transform them into dynamic classroom activities, so that students can experience cultural differences, improve their listening and speaking skills, language organization and creativity, and improve their communicative skills in practice.

Keywords: Role-play Activity; Communicative Skills; EFL.

1. Introduction

The continuous development of the world has led to the exchanges between countries around the world become closer and closer. As an international language, English has become more and more prominent in international communication. Thus, being able to communicate effectively in real life has gradually become a necessary ability for people. Moreover, Education department promulgated the English curriculum standard for compulsory education in 2022, which advocates the cultivation of students' comprehensive language application ability through the learning methods of experience, practice, participation, cooperation and communication. In addition, in recent years, the college entrance examination system has been undergoing continuous reform and paying more attention to the examination of students' language application ability rather than the examination of individual language knowledge items. And the oral English test has also begun to enter the college entrance examination, which is a great challenge to those students who have difficulty in speaking due to shyness or fear of committing mistakes or errors. It can be seen that this kind method of mute English learning, which relies solely on learning language knowledge to acquire language, is far from enough for them to communicate effectively in real life. However, in the current situation of English teaching, many teachers neglect the communicative function of language and do not pay much attention to the cultivation of students' communicative skills due to the pressure of teaching or their old teaching concepts. The ultimate purpose of learning should be to apply to practice, so teachers should realize the status and importance of cultivating students' communicative competence in English and improve their teaching methods accordingly.

Role-play activity, a student-centered teaching method, is a classroom activity similar to drama, in which students can be put into specific situations to play different roles. It is an effective way to mobilize students' enthusiasm and motivation for language learning and to develop students' communicative skills. As role-play activity provides learners with different communicative environments and different roles, students are more willing and interested in participating in communicative activities. And during the process of role-play activity, teachers can divide students into several groups

for practice and presentation, which improves students' participation in communicative activities and gives them more opportunities to show their skills and personalities. At the same time, role-playing as a kind of situational dialogue is also friendly to learners who are shy and reluctant to express themselves. These students can first act as listeners to see how their classmates behave in these situations, and gradually they can be integrated into these situations and are willing to act their roles to show their personalities. After one successful performance after another, their self-confidence will be strengthened again and again.

2. Literature Review

In this part, the concepts of role-play activity and communicative skills and their research development will be mentioned.

2.1. Role-play Activity

Role-play activity, as a teaching activity based on communicative language teaching, is an extension of communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching emphasizes that language can be learnt through interaction between people and communication is not only a means of language learning, but also the ultimate goal of language learning (Littlewood, 1981). Role-play was first introduced by Gorden in 1970. Richards et al (1993) argues that role play is a drama-like classroom activity, in which students play the roles of various participants in a situation and then perform what might typically happen in that situation, such as complaints, apologies and so on. According to Penny (1996), role-play activity refers to a variety of different types of activities. In these activities, students are able to imagine themselves in a particular situation outside the classroom, take on the role of someone else and choose appropriate language and behavior for a particular situation and role. Snow (2007) believes that role plays are form of pair practice that allows students to play, improvise, and create freely.

To sum up, role-play activity refers to the activity that people plays a specific role in a specific situation or pretending to deal with a given problem by pair or group, with the aim of developing students' communicative competence and creativity in order to communicate effectively and rationally. The main feature of role-play activity is to

dramatize the teaching content and to make the students actively participate in the learning process by giving them certain roles. Compared with general situational teaching, role-play not only creates an authentic communicative context, but also provides learners with contextual roles so that they can think in other's shoes and learn experientially.

2.2. Communicative Skills

Communicative skills were proposed by Hymes on the basis of Chomsky's language competence. Compared with language competence which emphasizes grammatical rules, communicative competence is more concerned with the actual use of language. Just as Hymes (1979) said: "the rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless." That is to say, the use of language should not only take into account the rules of grammar, but also the rules of language use in various situations. Moreover, Hymes proposed that communicative competence consists of four aspects. Firstly, possibility refers to the grammatical form of the language. Secondly, feasibility, which means the degree of completion of the language. Thirdly, reasonableness, which means that the logic of the language should be clear and coherent. Finally, validity means that the communication can be done effectively. Besides, Stern (1983) conducted a further study on communicative competence, in which he argued that language use is not only closely related to society, but also that culture plays a prominent role in the process of language use. And Wang Qiang (2006), a scholar in China, argues that "Communicative competence includes knowledge of what to say, when, how, where, and to whom."

In a word, Communicative skills refer to the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use them and to whom to use them correctly and appropriately. For example, when a person wants to communicate with others, in addition to the rules of grammar, he must take into account the social environment and social relations between them as well as the relationship between the contexts, so as to choose the appropriate and suitable language for communication, which will ensure the smooth and effective communication.

3. How Role-play Activity Affects Communicative Skills

Role-play activity provides authentic communicative situations and more opportunities for students to express themselves for the development of students' communicative skills. Specifically, by participating in role-play activities, students are able to improve their listening and speaking skills, intercultural communication awareness, language organization skills, and to timely identify and correct learning problems.

3.1. Creating Natural Communicative Context to Improve Students' Listening and Speaking Skills

Role-play activity, a kind of teaching activity that simulates real-life situations, can present the teaching content more intuitively in a lively form. Compared with traditional English teaching, role-playing transforms static knowledge into dynamic classroom activities, so that students can become participants and experiencers of teaching activities from bystanders, which deepens their understanding of language

knowledge and language rules of use in the process of experiencing this more realistic and natural contextual dialogue. The real communication situation created by role-playing can attract students' attention, effectively stimulate students' interest in learning, and thus form a harmonious classroom atmosphere. Since interpersonal communication takes place in real and natural situations, teachers need to consider creating a real and free communication situation when designing role-play activities. Only when students feel comfortable, free and have more opportunities to speak in the activity will they actively participate in the communicative activities. In order to creating authentic and natural communicative context, teachers can use PowerPoint to present the material, play YouTube video, picture cards and word cards to stimulate students' enthusiasm and motivation in language learning (Arismayang, 2016)

In addition, role-play activity provides students with more opportunities to speak and perform, and many of them will spend more time and effort in listening to the lectures in order to have a better performance, which effectively improves their participation during the process of learning. What's more, role-playing after language learning allows students to put what they have just learned into practice to express their ideas in target language. If there are any grammatical or linguistic errors in the process of performance, the "audiences" and the teacher will give immediate feedback. Because the role-playing activity is fun and innovative and the students, as "audiences", need to evaluate the performance, they will watch their classmates' performances carefully and listen attentively while watching, which helps them input discourse again and again and inadvertently consolidates what they have learned. It shows that role-play activity is a significant way to consolidate learning content and improve listening and speaking skills, whether for "participant" or "listener".

3.2. Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Awareness and Improve Intercultural Communicative Skills

In addition to social contexts, culture also affects the effects of development of communicative competence. Chinese culture is totally different from Western culture in terms of values, concepts of time, styles of behavior and so on. Mitchell and Myles (2004) believes that culture is learned when language is mastered; similarly, language is acquired when culture is enhanced. It can be seen that language and culture are closely related, and the success of communication cannot be achieved when cultural factors were ignored. As EFL learners, they need to know the culture of the target language and the differences between target language culture and native culture. Only by participating in communication through linguistic and non-linguistic activities in the cultural context of the target language can they gain an insight into people's thinking and behavioral styles and the political, social, religious, and economic systems that follow them (Zeng Jiajin, 2014). Language is not only a tool for communication, but also a carrier of culture.

In order to communicate effectively in English, students need more than just some knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; they must also understand the most common communicative situations in English-speaking countries. Therefore, implementing communicative activities that simulate different social roles in different social situations are necessary in the English classroom. Role-play activity enable learners to come into close contact with communicative

situations in English-speaking countries, so that they can understand and experience cultural differences and communicating under these cultural differences. Role-play activity based on communicative cultural themes are different from the language practice activities of pure skill training, which can reflect the collision and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures and the communicative cultural factors in the language context. It not only helps learners to enhance their language use ability in the activity experience, but also to understand communication under cultural differences, master effective communication strategies for intercultural communication.

3.3. Giving Feedback and Corrections in Time

Role-play also plays a unique evaluation and feedback function in language learning. The subject of evaluation in role-play activities is diversified. For the students in the role-play, in spite of the teacher evaluating their performance and giving feedback, other students in the classroom will also make evaluation. In addition, the performers will evaluate and reflect on their own practice and performance as well, and make corrections for deficiencies accordingly. This kind of evaluation activity is timely and effective. The problems revealed by students in their performances reflect their insufficient knowledge of grammar, rules of language use or cultural knowledge. students can discover their own deficiencies and correct them in time through the evaluation of teachers, classmates and themselves, which deepens and consolidates their learning content effectively. Making mistakes or errors in communicative activities is a normal phenomenon, so whether in peer evaluation or self-evaluation, teachers need to guide students to make a fair, comprehensive and objective evaluation, which means that they should take into account both strengths and weaknesses, encouragement and advice. Only in this way can we maximize the evaluation function of role-playing activities, so that students can find and correct their shortcomings in time and improve their communication skills.

3.4. Improving Creativity and Language Organization Skills

Some students have a good foundation in language knowledge and they can get good grades in exams, but they find it difficult to speak in communication, which shows that it is not enough to have a good foundation of linguistic and cultural knowledge, but the organization of language skills are also very important. The types of role-play activities include fully-scripted activity, semi-scripted activity and unscripted activity. Fully-scripted activity is very friendly for beginners and students at lower levels of schooling, which doesn't require much language and cultural knowledge, but it limits students' creativity at the same time. When students have a certain level of linguistic and cultural knowledge,

semi-scripted activity and unscripted activity are more desirable. This is because when there are fewer scripts, there are fewer restrictions on the students so that students have more freedom to use their creativity to organize the language. Role-play activities give students the freedom and opportunity to organize and create language through creating specific situations or questions.

4. Conclusion

Communicative skills are essential skills that EFL Learners must mastered. Role-play activity can create a meaningful learning environment that is interactive, cooperative, coordinated, and authentic contexts that are conducive to the development of communicative skills. In such learning environments, students are able to interact more naturally and speak more openly with each other. The colorful role-plays allow students to learn by acting, learn by using, and improve their listening and speaking skills, intercultural awareness and language organization skills in the process of acting and experiencing, which greatly promotes the development of students' communicative skills.

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