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

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Abstract: With the officially publication of General Senior High School Curricular Standards (2017 Edition) and English Curricular Standards for Compulsive Education (2022 Edition), Chinese English education formally steps into the "key competence era". The new standards put forward new ideas, new methods and new theories for English language teaching, and give higher requirements for teachers' "teaching" and students' "learning". Besides, since last century, scholars at home and abroad have carried out studies on "role-playing method" and "communicative skills" respectively, and later results confirmed the positive promotion of role-play activities to the cultivation of communicative skills. Therefore, role-playing method was originally used for theatrical performances and trainings, and then later introduced and widely used in foreign language teaching. The new standards clearly stipulates that it is necessary to "develop language ability, cultivate cultural awareness, improve thinking quality and learning ability". In order to develop learners' communicative ability, cultivate their key competences and promote all-round development, the effectiveness of a role-play activity in practical EFL learners' communicative skills is worth exploring.

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

1. Introduction

In 2018, *General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)* was published, aiming at implementing the Party's educational policy and the task of fostering virtue through education. In this edition, the concept of "key competences of English discipline" was formally defined, which includes language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity and learning ability. The publication of *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* in 2022 was a further inheritance and deepening of 2017 edition. Two editions work together and set different requirements for students from different grades and levels. Specifically, in the aspect of expression and communication, the 2020 edition pointed out that learners of level 1 should be able to "introduce the people and things around them, and express their emotions and feelings briefly", while level 2 "imitate and perform stories or little dramas with basically accurate intonation and pronunciation" and level 3 "use different structures and sentences to describe things and express opinions, attitudes etc.". All these requirements are new challenges for both teachers and students. Therefore, to enhance students' communicative skills and acquisition of language knowledge in certain context, and to meet the new requirements for teachers and students, it is quite necessary to adopt various interesting methods and activities like role-play.

Role-play activity is student-centered and it refers to that students play different roles in a certain situation to interact with each other. Its form, content, plot and conflicts in the story is relatively simple. It is one of the most effective ways of teaching and has been widely used to help students to be familiar with, practice and master certain sentence structures and language points in primary and high school English classroom teaching. It can bring many positive influences like arousing learners' interest and internal spontaneity, creating relaxed classroom atmosphere, building proper situations for learning, practicing learners' oral and communicative skills etc.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Role-Play

2.1.1. Definition

Role-play activity was originally used in psychological education in 1950s. In the 1960s, some American educators introduced it into classroom teaching, and made some empirical research on its teaching effectiveness. With continuous exploration for several decades, role-play become increasingly popular, and has gradually become a common way of teaching in many different disciplines.

As for its definition, experts and scholars put forward different views. Chesler and Fox (1966) pointed out that role-play is that students improvise freely and show properly related behaviors, language, expressions and emotions. Gillian (1987) referred to it as a kind of classroom activities, being similar to people's drama performance. Based on the scholars' opinions above, it can be concluded that role-play is about playing a role in a simulated setting and performing what happens in the situation. During the process, language is closely linked with behaviors, emotions and attitudes of different roles.

Considering the theoretical basis, domestic scholar Zheng Tianjiao (2013) held that role-play can be directly combined with communicative approach, which is student-centeredness and emphasize the improvement of students' ability to use language through the communicative role-play activity. Zong Xinyu (2016) believes that role-playing method also reflects other teaching methods, like situational teaching method and task-based teaching method. Therefore, it is understandable to know that role-play is a comprehensive embodiment of various teaching methods.

2.1.2. Application

Role-play originated from children's theatrical performances and was firstly used as a training and testing tool by psychologists and dramatists (Xiao Qiang, 2011). Because of its positive influences on practicality, autonomy

and creativity, it was later introduced and applied in second foreign language teaching. Cohen and Trosborg used role-play for pragmatic research, like apology, request, refusal, complaint and suggestion. Littlewood (1981) focused on the teaching functions and implementation of role-play. Ladhouse (1987) designed many lesson plans about applying role-play. Jeremy Harmer (2012) put forward the simple operational steps of carrying out role-play in oral teaching.

English teaching is the center of domestic research on the application of role-play in second language teaching. Its coverage includes English majors and non-English majors, and also almost all the fundamental grades like primary schools, high schools, universities (Zhou Jiuhong, 2017; Dai Xinzhang, 2015; Li Jun, 2010; Dai Fenghui, 2008). As far as the practical value of role-play, four main ideas can be concluded. They are arousing students' interest and stimulating their learning motivation (Deqing Zhuoma, 2014), helping to create a truly student-centered classroom and cultivate students' ability to express, cooperate and perform (Ding Dao, 2012; Duan Xiaokai, 2013), promote the professional growth of teachers, and fourthly close the distance between teachers and students and create a good classroom atmosphere (Shao Xu, 2011; Ding Dao, 2012). In more concrete manner, as for how to apply role-play in English teaching, Deqing Zhuoma (2014) and Zhu Zhaoxia (2017) designed six main steps and three stages. Strategically, Zhu Aihua (2010) and Zhu Zhaoxia (2017) put forward different strategies for effective application of role-play in English teaching.

2.2. Communicative Skills

2.2.1. Communicative Competence and Communicative Skills

From the perspectives of languages' definition and structure, British linguists Jack and Theodore (2001) clearly showed that the communicative function of language is the most essential one. In 1970s, by rethinking and reorganizing Chomsky's definition of "competence", Hymes (1972) firstly put forward "communicative competence". He believed communicative competence includes not only language knowledge but also rules of language usage in social contexts, and the goal of language teaching is not just about cultivating "language competence" but also "communicative competence". Later, Canale and Swain (1980) further expanded Hymes' defining of "communicative competence" into grammatical, sociolinguistic, textual and strategic competence. Widdowson (1978) put forward four elements of effective language communication, including certain language knowledge, ability to use language knowledge, language communicative ability and socio-cultural knowledge. Domestic professor Li Xiaoju (1997) believed that communicative competence includes three categories, namely language, discourse and pragmatic competence. Those three categories are interrelated, coordinated and integrated into a whole. Above all, communicative competence is indeed complex, involving many factors.

When it comes to "communicative skills", "communicative competence" can't be ignored. They are closely related but have distinct definitions. Broadly speaking, communicative competence refers to the speaker's ability to use linguistic and nonverbal means to achieve a specific communicative purpose in various social and cultural contexts. Communicative skills include skills like speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Communicative skills focus on the practical application of language to accomplish communication goals, while communicative competence refers to the overall ability. Therefore, it can be concluded that communicative skill is a specific component of communicative competence.

2.2.2. Cultivation of Communicative Skills

The cultivation of communicative competence is also the process of cultivating communicative skills. At present, communicative teaching method putting forward by British applied linguists, is mainly adopted for cultivating communicative competence. This method emphasizes learner-centeredness, communicative interaction of learners, and the authenticity of teaching environment and content. However, it stresses the cultivation of oral communicative competence too much, affecting the improvement of learners' reading ability and grammatical system.

Besides, some domestic scholars put forward their different views from other perspectives. Wang Liqin(2008) came up with three strategies and they are:(1)adopting student-centered classroom teaching, (2)combining receptive skills and productive skills, and (3)paying attention to the study of communication strategies and cultural knowledge. Luo Yanxia and Wang Zhifang(2009) designed a model of applying task-based teaching method to cultivate students' English communicative competence, consisting of five steps. Chen Yu(2010) put forward a training model and three aspects are emphasized. Firstly, studying cultural background knowledge and cultivating students' pragmatic competence; secondly, designing communicative teaching practice based on different settings; and thirdly, making full use of network and multimedia resources. In a word, the cultivation of communicative skills revolves around four dimensions, namely language, emotional, environment and culture dimension.

3. Discussions on Communicative Skills and Role-Play Activity.

3.1. Pursuit of Fluency and Accuracy in Communication Activities.

Communication activities can be normally divided into oral, written and physical communication. In second language teaching, different classroom practices are usually oriented to different objectives, some aiming at fluency and some accuracy (Brumfit,1984). Fluency-oriented teaching pays little attention to the correction of mistakes, while accuracy-oriented teaching emphasizes clear understanding of grammatical points. Generally speaking, fluency is regarded as the primary goal during cultivation of communicative skills. However, under the background of second language teaching, there are irreconcilable contradictions between the pursuit of fluency and accuracy. For written communication activity, accuracy is very important. The common criterions for judgment lie in the written logics and conformity of grammatical norms. Definitely, a small number of grammatical mistakes can be reasonably accepted, which will not affect the completion of its communicative purpose. However, if a 120-word composition contains dozens of grammatical errors, which may lead to readers' misunderstanding, the score obtained language proficiency test would be low. Besides, in real life, some people may claim that grammar is not important in oral communication activities, as long as the fluent goal is achieved. Some other

may also hold that Americans don't care about grammatical rules at all, and they often use simple past tense to describe the present state. Because of that, grammatical rules or expression norms are often ignored in oral communication, contributing to puzzlement and misunderstanding. Actually, both fluency and accuracy are important in oral communication activities.

3.2. Connection Between Role-Play and Cultivation of Communicative Skills.

Littlewood (1981) believes that one of the most effective ways to cultivate learners' communicative skills is to put learners in specific communicative situations and let learners use their learned language to meet their communicative needs. Considering that, role-playing is a good way, which refers to a kind of English classroom activity and is the simulation of a real language scene. Within it, students play different characters in a certain language scene, imitating various real language communication activities. The output of conversation requires students to have a deep understanding of textbook knowledge, and combine those rigid knowledge and personal life experiences together for the application in language performance. It can cultivate students' listening and speaking skills in various language environments to a great degree.

4. The Effective Functions of Role-Play Activity to Practice and Develop EFL Learner's Communicative Skills

4.1. Activate Internal Interest and Spontaneity for Communicative Activity

Interest is the intrinsic motivation for learning. Once learners are interested in English learning, they will have a strong desire for related knowledge and cultural information, so as to gradually improve their studying efficiency and results. Role-playing, as a kind of experiential and intuitive teaching, is widely used in English teaching. Through role-playing, learners can be induced into the set situation. Within it, they can gain knowledge and consolidate their studying. Besides, their sense and excitement and interest in English will be greatly improved. Moreover, the form of role-play can also test learners' thinking and improvising ability. In situational communication, teachers can give them a specific topic and then ask them for freely talking and improvising, while learners need to design and formulate their dialogue and content in limited time.

4.2. Deepen Understanding and Comprehension of Language and Cultural Knowledge

Due to the eastern and western countries' cultural differences, there are great deviations in the way of understanding vocabulary and thinking about language expression. For words and vocabulary, apart from the inherent meaning in the dictionary, there are many other attached and associated meanings which can be reflected only when put into sentences. A lack of in-depth understanding of foreign cultures is often accompanied with a shallow understanding of the internal meaning of words. Therefore, when mentioning a same thing, the English words that come to native speakers' and EFL learners' mind are not consistent. For example, "politician" is translated as "zheng zhi jia" in Mandarin. However, in the English context, the word "politician" is a derogatory term, which often refer to some insidious and shrewd people who engage in politics for their own interests. The more proper one that can really be translated as "zheng zhi jia" should be "statesman". It generally refers to the officials with high prestige in both English and Chinese context. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze these words with distinctive cultural features. Through role-playing, learners' understanding and knowledge of vocabulary usage and western culture can be deepened by personal experiencing and practicing.

4.3. Improve Oral Communicative Skills and Ability

The ultimate goal of English learning is learners' real English application competence. Through role-play activity, learners' command of English knowledge in the brain can be transformed into their own language instinct. During role-play, learners direct, write English dialogues, read stories and act by themselves, and audience and teachers can ask performing members corresponding questions. Thus, on the one hand, it consolidates learners' knowledge in a meaningful way. On the other hand, it enables learners to understand the psychological status of the role they play under the situational conditions, and use proper language for performance, so as to improve learners' communicative skills.

4.4. Educate Learners for All-round Development

Role-play activity also has great educational functions, which is embodied in learners' acquisition of knowledge about social issues and values and the ability to easily express their personal views. The focus of education is not just about learning some simple knowledge, but to make the educated absorb cultural values comprehensively and reasonably, cultivate and build their character and soul, and finally grow to be all-round and multi-dimensional people.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the effectiveness of a role-play activity in practicing EFL learner's communicative skills, analyzing it from four aspects, which includes the introduction of background information from the perspective of new curriculum standards, the collection of research results about "role-play" and "communicative skills" at home and abroad, then some personal discussions on communicative skills and role-play activity, and lastly the effective functions of role-play activity to practice and develop EFL learner's communicative skills. The paper is written, with the hope to provide possible reference and ideas for learners' development of communicative skills with the method of role-play.

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