

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

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Abstract: The essence and core pursuit of English learning is to communicate in English. Role-play activity is an important means of English learning. In role-play activities, students communicate and interact under specific learning topics to achieve the purpose of applying what they have learned. This paper expounds on the importance of role-play activity in English teaching to cultivate English learners' communicative skills and competence. Role-playing activities help stimulate students' communicative intention, enhance students' communicative creativity, and create a harmonious communication atmosphere to improve students' communicative competence. This paper also discusses the methods and suggestions for using role-play activities to improve English learners' communicative skills and competence. Teachers should create a suitable communication situation, develop students' communicative competence according to the role-playing Stage, and use communicative strategies and conversational skills to realize communicative intention.

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

1. Introduction

With the development of economic globalization, communicative competence has become an indispensable criterion for evaluating students' English language competence. It is an important pursuit of today's education to cultivate English learners' communicative competence and promote their all-round development of core qualities. The *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision)* point out that English is an important communication tool for international exchanges and cooperation, and learning and using English is beneficial to mutual understanding and communication between China and other countries. The communicative competence development of high school English learners has been specified in the curriculum standards. For example, to meet social needs, students need to initiate dialogue and continue to communicate, describe the process of events clearly, and use formal or informal language forms according to the needs of expression[1] (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). It can be seen that it is essential to cultivate students' English communicative competence in senior high school English teaching. Role-playing infuses the meaning of communicative culture and focuses on the realization of English communicative functions. Starting from the social experience of learners, it creates a cross-cultural communication situation from real life for students to perform, so that they can build up their cognition of the communicative culture and rules of the target language while experiencing roles and empathy. And then promote the cultivation of English learners' communicative competence[2] (Dan, 2005). Through literature research, this paper explores the role of role-playing activities in cultivating English learners' communicative competence. Then it puts forward strategies to improve English learners' communicative competence by using role-playing activities, to optimize and improve high school English teaching, to achieving the development of students' communicative competence and core English accomplishment.

2. Role-Play Activity and Communicative Skills

2.1. Definition of Role-Play Activity

Role-Play is a kind of communication activity, involving verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Role-Play activities are the projection of social activities in real-life situations[3] (Afdillah, 2015). In Role-Play activities, participants play a role in real life according to learning requirements and their own understanding, and through meaningful language communication, highlight the character's personality characteristics, ideas, and behavior habits. Role-Play activities provide learners with the opportunity to use the target language and conversational resources, thereby stimulating authentic conversational interactions in different social contexts and social roles[4] (Al-Senaidi, 2010). By playing a specific role, students can deeply experience and understand the emotions, attitudes, and values contained in the role, so as to achieve a deep understanding of the teaching content and Role-Play[5] (Cheng, 2016).

The basic elements of role-playing activities are purpose, situation, and role. First of all, role-playing activities need to take into account teaching content and student development. Therefore, role-playing activities should be oriented to teaching goals, increase the interest and authenticity of teaching content, and enable students to develop expression, communication, and cooperation skills in the process of activities. Secondly, role-playing activities are closely related to the set situation. The situation provides rich and real background information for the characters' words and deeds and also provides support and guarantee for the vivid role-playing. Role-playing situations can be divided into internal role-playing situations and external classroom role-playing situations. The former mainly provides the identity and events of the character and other related information. The latter creates an atmosphere for students' role-playing activities and helps students get involved in role-playing activities more

easily. Secondly, the role is a key element in role-playing activities. In role-playing activities, students need to think, speak, and act from the perspective of the specific characters they are playing, which helps students to think in other places, improve their social cognition, and form correct values.

2.2. Definition of Communicative Skill

Researchers' definitions of communicative skill are diverse. Widdowson argues that communicative skill refers to the ability to use grammatical sentences in order to achieve a variety of language actions[6] (1978). Hymes defines communicative skill as the mastery and use of language knowledge by individuals, which not only means that speakers can use language knowledge to express opinions accurately but also means that speakers can choose and use various means according to various situations to ensure smooth and appropriate speech[7] (1964). Canale and Swain defined communicative skill as the ability of the speaker to make use of the original pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and other language knowledge to compose sentences in a specific scene and to use certain verbal or non-verbal means to properly express himself and achieve communicative purposes[8] (1980).

It can be seen that communicative skill refers to the ability to use appropriate conversational skills and communicative strategies to carry out interpersonal communication based on certain language competence according to specific communicative context, object, topic, and purpose[9] (Guo, 2002). Communicative skill is grammatical, comprehensibility, appropriateness, and practicality. Grammatical skill refers to the communicator's ability to produce grammatical sentences; Comprehensibility of communicative skill refers to the communicator's ability to produce sentences that can be understood. The appropriateness of communicative skill refers to the communicator's ability to communicate reasonably in a specific situation. The practicability of communicative skill refers to the communicator's ability to use language in communication. In addition, communicative skill includes language skill, pragmatic skill, and strategic skill. Among them, language skill is the basis and strategic skill is the core.

3. Effect of Role-Play Activity on English Communicative Skill and Competence

Role-play activities play a positive role in the cultivation and development of English learners' communicative skills and abilities. To be specific, first, role-playing activities provide real-life situations that help stimulate students' communicative intention; Secondly, students solve open and challenging problems through role-playing activities, which helps to enhance students' communicative creativity; Third, cooperative inquiry learning helps to create a harmonious communication atmosphere and improve students' communicative competence.

Role-playing activities provide students with meaningful topics based on specific real situations, which helps stimulate students' willingness to communicate. Role-playing activities provide situations that are closely practiced with students' daily lives, and students can use their daily life experiences to freely express their opinions and ideas. Therefore, teachers should choose the types, contents, and strategies of situations according to different teaching contents. They should not only

consider the situation to adapt to the physical and mental characteristics of students but also promote the stimulation of students' communicative intention and the development of communicative competence. Only situations that conform to students' cognitive levels and are close to students' life experiences and emotional experiences can stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm in English communication. Role-playing activities are conducive to restoring the coherence, purpose, and practicality of daily life to the maximum extent, and have positive significance in stimulating students' communicative willingness and correcting students' communicative attitudes.

The open and challenging questions in the role-playing activities help enhance students' communicative creativity. Role-playing is a teaching activity that encourages students to learn a new language creatively and effectively, which is conducive to the development of learners' creativity. The problem of searching for fixed answers seriously affects the enthusiasm and creativity of students to participate in communicative interaction. Teachers should create situations and rules so that students become the main body of learning, let students choose their roles, analyze and solve problems from different angles, and share their own experiences and views with peers. For example, in a supermarket situation, the two students can play the role of a salesman and a customer. The salesman needs to sell juice to the customer. Students need to give full play to their creative thinking to express their views on the nutritional value of juice, price concessions, and other aspects to promote juice.

Cooperative inquiry learning is helpful in creating a harmonious communication atmosphere for students and promoting the development of communicative competence. There are various forms of role-playing, which can be performed by a group of two people. In general, group members play the roles of questioner and responder, and carry out question-and-answer communication and exchange[10] (Yang, 2021). Role-playing can also involve a group of people in a specific situation using English for communication purposes. Through cooperative learning and inquiry learning, students can take the initiative to discover problems, conduct in-depth discussions layer by layer, form solutions to problems from multiple perspectives, and communicate with creative thinking and critical thinking. After the role-playing activities, students will discuss the content and problems of role-playing under the guidance of teachers, so that students' knowledge will be transformed from the stage of "acting" to the stage of cognitive internalization. This not only exercises the students' expression ability but also helps to improve the overall participation of students and create a harmonious atmosphere for communication.

4. Strategies of Role-play Activity to Develop Students' Communicative Skills

4.1. Based on the Real Theme Context, Create a Suitable Communication Situation

Subject context provides topic scope and background information for language learning, which directly affects students' language learning ability, thinking development level, and interactive communication effectiveness. Role-playing activities need to be based on the real theme situation, and according to the teaching content, students' interests,

hobbies and English development level, and other factors, so that students can speak in a relatively real context to achieve the purpose of communication. Reasonable and real topic context can effectively stimulate students' interest in learning and improve their English expression and application ability by creating a lively English communication situation. Reasonable communication situation is conducive to promoting the transfer of students' knowledge so that students can eventually transfer what they have learned into their future language communication skills through practice[11] (Ren, 2018).

The situational content of role-playing should be based on the textbook and classroom teaching content. In the *Senior High School English Compulsory II*, each unit sets up role-playing activities based on the thematic context of the unit. Teachers should make reasonable use of role-playing activities in textbooks to promote the development of students' communicative competence under specific topics. For example, the thematic context content of Unit 3 On the Move is sports and a healthy lifestyle. The role-playing activities of Unit 3 are based on the context of unit sports, setting the specific context of the reporter's interview with the dragon boat racing team, leading the students to learn about traditional Chinese sports and deepen their understanding of Chinese culture.

4.2. Develop Students' Communicative Competence According to the Role-playing Stage

The implementation stage of role-playing activities is divided into the preparation stage, performance stage, and reflection stage, which are interrelated and independent of each other[12](Zeng, 2014).

In the preparation stage of role-play activities, teachers should determine the performance theme and performance form, present language materials and situational information, and guide students to discuss in groups. First of all, the performance theme should concretely reflect the unit theme, get close to the reality of students' lives, promote students to identify and use new language and behavioral standards, and cultivate communicative awareness and ability. For example, when students move into a new home and ask for directions, this situation is in line with the theme of Unit 2 and the needs of students and is conducive to helping students establish the thinking mode and behavioral habits of asking for directions in the target language. In addition, the linguistic materials and plot information of the target language involve phonetics, vocabulary, sentence pattern, and other linguistic knowledge, which requires students to master its literal rational use and understand its potential emotional and cultural connotation. For example, when asking for directions, a student can ask "Could you tell me how I can get to... ?; I was wondering where the ... is." Etc. Finally, teachers should guide students to discuss in groups, assign roles, and design lines.

In the performance stage of role-playing activities, students assume a specific role on the stage, cooperate to interpret the communicative situation, and apply the newly learned language and cultural knowledge to the communicative activities through speculation and cooperation, which is conducive to students' independent in-depth learning. Teachers should give timely feedback to students in the process of role-playing activities, either by nodding and smiling to show approval or by body movements to indicate mistakes. For example, in the situation of asking for

directions, one of the students plays the role of the person asking for directions, and the other plays the role of a local person, asking questions about local conditions.

In the reflection and evaluation stage of role-playing activities, teachers should evaluate students' performance. Positive affirmations are naturally necessary, however, pertinent criticism and suggestions can help students to do in-depth reflection. Teachers should comprehensively evaluate students' performance according to their vocabulary use, fluency, accuracy, interactivity, and creativity in role-playing activities, and give corresponding suggestions for solving problems. In addition, teachers can also invite students to comment on roles and plots, propose strategies to get rid of communicative difficulties, extend them to problems in similar communicative situations, and summarize effective strategies to solve similar problems.

4.3. Use Communicative Strategies and Conversational Skills to Realize Communicative Intention

Communicative competence refers to the ability to use appropriate conversational skills and communicative strategies to carry out interpersonal communication on the basis of having certain language competence and according to specific communicative context, topic, and purpose[13] (Zheng, 2015). The use of communication strategies and conversational skills in role-playing activities is conducive to ensuring the fluency and accuracy of communication and realizing the communicative intention. Communicative strategies are the strategies adopted by language learners to make up for their lack of language knowledge when they have limited mastery of the target language[14] (Faerch&Kasper, 1983). It includes not only lexical and grammatical strategies, but also pragmatics, psychology, and other factors. Through the clever use of communication strategies, we can maintain smooth communication, so as to enhance the participants' confidence in communication, and finally achieve the goal of communication.

Language learners can use paraphrasing strategies, help-seeking strategies, delaying strategies, and paralinguistic strategies to enhance communicative fluency. Due to the limitation of language knowledge, English learners adopt synonyms and paraphrases to express meaning. Help-seeking strategy refers to the method by which English learners directly ask each other about relevant words or sentence patterns in communication. Procrastination strategy refers to the way that English learners use formulaic, repetitive, and other means to delay their speaking speed and seek appropriate expression. Paralinguistic strategies refer to the use of nonverbal means such as body language and external objects to convey information.

In addition, conversational skills are conducive to proper communication and cooperation between speakers. English learners should master and apply conversational skills such as opening the topic, changing the topic, ending the topic, and interjecting in the role-playing activities to promote the smooth progress of communication and achieve the purpose of communication. First of all, in daily life, the communicative parties will choose different greetings to open the topic according to the formal level of the communicative occasion; Secondly, both parties will change the topic with modal words such as "well" and "now" due to personal interest and situational factors. Third, the two sides of the communication will choose different closing words to end the

topic according to different situations; In addition, communicators will use repetition, modal words, and other ways to interrupt the dialogue and express their views.

5. Conclusion

Role-playing activities play an important role in promoting the formation and development of English learners' communicative skills and abilities. The life situation provided by role-playing activities helps to stimulate students' communicative intention. Moreover, the open questions in the role-playing activities are helpful to enhance students' communicative creativity. In addition, cooperative inquiry learning helps to create a harmonious communication atmosphere and improve students' communicative competence. Therefore, English teachers should create a real theme context and a suitable communicative situation in role-playing activities. What's more, teachers should cultivate students' communicative competence according to the stage of role-playing. Finally, teachers should guide students to use communicative strategies and conversational skills to realize communicative intentions.

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