

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

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Abstract: Role-play activity is a teaching technique in EFL learners' classroom that encourages students to actively participate in the English learning process. Role-play activity is interactive and can help students connect reality with books. In role-play activity, different forms of activities guide students to proficiently grasp English oral communication knowledge and improve their communication skills. This article mainly explores how effectiveness of using the three types of role-play activities in English teaching classrooms, mainly scripted role-play, semi-scripted role-play and non-scripted roleplay, to improve EFL learners' communication skills.

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

1. The Definitions of Role-play Activity

In most people's eyes, role-play activity is usually associated with words like "performance", "imitation", or "drama". Actually, the term "role-play" first entered the research field in the 1930s. In the field of psychology, role-play is a psychotherapy method proposed by American psychiatrist Moreno. He believes that role-play is a temporary form of behavior that involves changing one's body movements, facial expressions, and verbal expressions, transitioning from "oneself" to "others", in order to gain a clearer and better understanding of oneself [1].

Afterwards, with the development of the times and the deepening of research on role-play activity, role-play activity gradually applied to the field of education, but scholars also had different views when it comes to the definition of "role-play".

Tompkins defined the "role-play" activity as a classroom teaching technique that encourages students to actively participate in the English learning process [2]. Therefore, if EFL learners practice their target language in the real-life contexts, their stress and shyness will be eliminated in these situations. In fact, role-play activity is not equivalent to imitation. Imitation is mechanical, inflexible, and non-creative, while role-play activity is interactive, flexible, and involves creative thinking during the process. The research of Cornett also shows that when students actively participate in role-play activity, in addition to using body language for face-to-face communication, they can also improve language fluency and oral interaction skills [3]. These skills are particularly important for students learning a foreign language, as they may not have more willing to speak English in his/her own spare time and have less opportunity to communicate with native speakers. They desire to master the target language and then improve their speaking fluency and ability by making full use of the opportunities to participating in role-play activity. Doing a role play activity simply requires players to "act" other roles in the same way. Therefore, doing a role-play activity can clearly understand many aspects of the same person, such as their reactions, values, emotions, and attitudes. Liu Hong, a domestic scholar, defines role-play as a way to create or imitate a certain episode of real life, in which learners play the role and show the language, behavior,

expression and inner world of the role so as to learn new behaviors or problem-solving methods [4]. Simply speaking, role-play is to temporarily place one person in another's position, thinking from the perspective of another person and act according to their behaviors and requirements.

2. The Relationship Between Role-play and Communicative Skills

Role-play activity can help EFL learners connect reality with books and cultivate their communicative skills. Since role-play activity is interactive, it can not only improve students' oral skills, but also greatly enhance their communicative skills. As Holt and Kysilka pointed out, role-play activity can be fun and can also drive learning. The skills learned in role-play activity can be used for communication between students, helping them understand the importance of cooperation and communication [5]. Yang Jixing also mentioned that different forms of role-play activities can guide students to proficiently master English oral communication knowledge and improve their own oral communicative skills [6]. In the learning process of EFL learners, the first and most important thing is to have a clearer understanding and grasp of the roles in the reading text or a script, and they also should know what methods can be used to achieve the best performance of the roles they act. So before doing the role-play activity, learner need to be familiar with the relevant oral communication content and knowledge, then determine the role they want to play. Next, they communicate and interact with other group members in their own roles they act. During the performance process, they also need to fully immerse themselves in the role they act. In this way, through the participating in the role-play activity, students can greatly improve their communicative skills by interacting with other members during the performance process based on their previous learning work of the extensive oral communicative knowledge.

3. The Effectiveness of a Role-Play Activity to Communicative Skills

Role-play activity is the typical social communicative activity within a communicative approach. The rationales of communicative approach direct that composing and

manipulating meaningful role-play activities within the framework of English classroom is to cultivate students' communicative competence is of vital importance [7]. There are three types of role-play activities. They are mainly fully scripted role-play, semi-scripted role-play and non-scripted roleplay. In a fully scripted role-play, each word is given, and each student should understand or memorize his/her role. Semi-scripted role-play refers to students who can use their creativity to make appropriate and reasonable adaptations based on the provided texts or a dialogue. Non-scripted roleplay refers to the students who are provided with the context in which the role-play needs or certain keywords, and the content of role-play activity is played by students themselves based on their knowledge reserves and specific situations, such as "buying clothes in the store", "seeking help after losing airport luggage" and so on. The following part will introduce how effectiveness of using the three types of role-play activity promote EFL learners' communicative skills through teaching design in EFL learners' classroom.

3.1. Using Fully Scripted Role-play to Increase EFL Learners' Input of Communicative Language Knowledge

During the learning process of EFL learners, the type of fully scripted role-play mainly refers to the imitation of the dialogue in specific English textbooks. The main purpose of this type of role-play activity is to make every item of the language meaningful and easy to remember. This type of role-play activity is more suitable for relatively lower-level students.

In the current junior high school English textbooks of the People's Education Press in our country, the title of Section A 2e in each unit is "Role play the conversation", which also shows the important position of doing the role-play activity in junior high school English learning. Take the seventh grade English textbook for junior high school published by People's Education Press Volume I Unit 7 How much are these socks? for example. In the Section A 2e "Role play the conversation" part, the teacher first uses group cooperation method to divide the students into pairs to practice the following dialogue, and doing the role-play activity within the groups.

Woman (student A): Can I help you?

Mary (student B): Yes, please, I need a sweater for school.

Woman (student A): OK. What color do you want?

Mary (student B): Blue.

Woman (student A): How about this one?

Mary (student B): It looks nice. How much is it?

Woman (student A): Nine dollars.

Mary (student B): I'll take it.

Woman (student A): Here you are.

Mary (student B): Thank you.

During the process of role-play, students can master sentence structures such as "Can I help you?" "How about...?" "How much...?" "Here you are.". In this role-play activity, students can also exchange roles, enabling them to know how to use appropriate language for communication when they are in similar situations in daily life [8]. Through this form of role-play activity can not only consolidate the vocabulary and sentence patterns the students learned, but also enrich students' knowledge reserves, increase communicative language knowledge input, and lay a solid foundation for

improving students' comprehensive communicative skills.

3.2. Using Semi Scripted Role-Play to Stimulate EFL Learners' Enthusiasm for Communication

Semi-scripted role-play includes a model conversation with some missing words and students should know how to fill in the blanks in suitable words of these contexts [9]. That's to say students can transform the main conversation into some way to establish their own dialogue. Therefore, when teaching EFL learners, teachers can first conduct in-depth analysis and interpretation of the dialogue content in the textbook. Then they can reprocess the dialogue based on the roles and content in the dialogue, and appropriately adapt the dialogue in order to make the role-play script more conducive to students' performance. For example, teachers can adjust and assign appropriate roles based on the conversation, add or remove some dialogue elements, and make the character image more rounded. After completing the script adaptation task, the teacher can ask students to group according to the roles they choose to act, allowing them to choose the most suitable role for their performance based on their characteristics, English expression ability, preference, etc. At the same time, teachers can encourage students to add their own thinking according to the needs of the plot and changes in the plot, and adjust their intonation, tone, speed as the plot unfolds in order to make the entire role-play activity more complete, meaningful, and immersive. Take the seventh grade English textbook for junior high school published by People's Education Press Volume II Unit 8 Is there a post office near here? for example. The following is the original dialogue in the Section A 2e "Role play the conversation" part of this unit:

Tony: Hi, excuse me.

Linda: Yes. How can I help you?

Tony: Well, I am new in town. Is there a bank around here?

Linda: Yes, there is. It's on Center Street. It's across from the park.

Tony: Oh...where is Center Street?

Linda: It's not too far from here. I can walk with you.

Tony: Oh, that's great! Thanks so much.

Linda: No problem.

When organizing the role-play activity of this part, teachers can ask students not to follow the words set in the dialogue word by word. They can first present a simple map of a small town. The students who act Tony can ask the students who act Linda in English for the route to the place they want to go, and the students who act Linda can answer in English about how to go to various places. In this process of role-play activity, students are not limited to one place and one route in the original conversation, but rather allow them to express themselves in multiple ways. For example, students can adapt "Is there a bank around here?" to "Is there a hospital near here?" or "It's not too far from here." to "You can go along this street and turn left, then you can see a bus station, the bank is next to the bus station." In addition, students can also add their own emotions into it, such as "urgent" or "relaxed". The scene reflected in such role-play activity is often closely related to students' real life, so they have rich life experience to let them have more willing to express and communicate. At the same time, such activities can also expand students' English knowledge and improve their oral communicative skills. Role-play requires students to cooperate and coordinate

with each other and this type of activity can effectively cultivate their coordination skills, communicative skills as well as the collaborative spirit.

3.3. Using Non Scripted Role-play to Improve EFL Learners' Communicative Skills

Non-scripted role play provides a great chance to employ the information of communicative techniques in a certain situation. Students can build on their opinions and thoughts, and establish language on their level, acting out in some situations based on their understanding. Because there is no fixed conversation mode in non-scripted role-play activity, teachers can only provide a context for students to freely express and act. For example, the teacher first divides the students into several small groups, and then creates a scenario of "at the airport" under which the students do the role-play activity in groups. The role-play scenarios that students can choose from can include: contacting lost and found; booking a ticket online; missing the flight; complaining about damaged luggage and so on. In this non-scripted role-play activity, students can freely act and communicate according to specific situations or contexts. During this process, students can generate the following dialogues like this:

Context: at airport

Situation: contacting lost and found

Student A: This is Lost and Found. How can I help you?

Student B: I lost my wallet in this airport.

Student A: Don't worry. Sir. Can you describe your wallet? When did you find it was lost?

Student B: My wallet is black with flowers and it was missing when I was checking in...

Student A: ...

In this non-scripted role-play activity, it can be seen that students do the role-play in real contexts, and there is no specific framework or terminology for playing. Students use language and communicate with people in specific practices. Therefore, doing the role-play activity allows students to have a "role". When expressing this role, students have a good opportunity for oral communication and this is also a good opportunity to use language. Role-play, as a communicative activity, is crucial for helping students engage in meaningful and comprehensive interactions, and providing opportunities to practice fluency and accuracy while using English. This further enhances participants' confidence and helps them

express their ideas. They have the opportunity to speak in class and practice using English in some situations, while also paying attention to the correct use of grammar. In this process of communication, students use their language knowledge to exchange information with others and improve their communicative skills.

4. Conclusion

In the classroom of EFL learners, adopting appropriate role-play activity can help students enhance their foundation and improve their English communicative skills. Designing teaching based on different types of role-play activity can enrich students' language knowledge, and placing them in certain contexts can enhance their enthusiasm for expression. Therefore, teachers should attach importance to the positive role of doing the role-play activity in improving students' oral expression and communicative skills.

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