The Importance of Role-Playing Activities in Developing Students' Speaking Competence

Khamouja Abdessallam, Mohamed Ben Mohamed, and Azize El Ghouati

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco

ABSTRACT: One of the primary purposes of learning foreign languages, particularly English, is the ability to communicate effectively with other users of the target language. Role-playing, one of the communicative teaching methods, is believed to develop learners' speaking competence and help them learn the language in an authentic context. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the role-play teaching method and students' speaking competence. The current study uses two semi-structured interviews. One is designed for teachers teaching the 9th-grade level. The other is designed for a class at the 9th-grade level with 30 students. The findings show that role-play activities participate in developing students' speaking skills.

KEYWORDS: Role-play, speaking, motivation.

1 INTRODUCTION

A language is a tool for communication. We communicate with others to express our ideas and learn others' ideas. Communication takes place where there is speech. We cannot communicate with one another without speech. Therefore, the importance of speaking skills is enormous for learners of any language. Without speech, a language is reduced to a mere script (Yale, 2006). There are many speaking activities to develop learners' speaking skills, among which we find role-playing activities. Incorporating such speaking activities into the classroom can be an effective teaching tool because they add variety, a change of pace, and opportunities for language production and fluency development (Al-Arishi & Yaha, 1994). However, some teachers need to be aware of role-plays' possibilities in developing students' communicative competence. Most of them think that such activities are marginal. They are inappropriate because they cause discipline problems and create chaos in the classroom (Huang, 2008). Hence, this study was conducted to investigate teachers' views about role-play activities and the extent to which the latter can develop students' speaking competence.

The present study addresses the following research questions:

a) Is there a relationship between role-playing activities and students' speaking competence?
b) What are teachers' beliefs and views about role-playing activities?

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 THE PLACE OF SPEAKING AMONG THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS

The aims of language teaching courses are commonly defined in relation to the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Depending on the language user's activity, Widdowson (1978) groups them into receptive and productive ones. Reading and listening belong to receptive skills, whereas speaking and writing are classified as productive skills. Effective foreign language learning necessitates the assimilation of all four skills; hence, SLA is a complicated and time-consuming process. Speaking and writing are called productive skills because they involve language production. While uttering

sounds gives a chance to communicate orally, writing skills enable people to communicate in a written form. Nevertheless, Ur (1996), in her book titled 'A Course in Language Teaching," indicates:

> " of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as « speakers » of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign languages learners are primarily interested in learning to speak (Ur 1996: 120) p75. "

The author of these words emphasizes the importance of speaking and the fact that it involves quite a vast knowledge of different language aspects. Therefore, speaking may be perceived as a complicated process. Furthermore, speaking is one of the most challenging skills students may possess since it requires, first and foremost, a great deal of practice and exposure (Thornbury, 2005). Nowadays, many people identify fluency in speaking as the most desirable ability in their target language, for talking smoothly with a native speaker very often proves the actual linguistic level (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Accordingly, for most people, the ability to speak a foreign language is synonymous with knowing that language because speech is, for them, the essential means of human communication (Scrivener, J, 2005).

2.2 REASONS FOR TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS

Being able to speak a foreign language means having communicative efficiency. It is challenging to imagine what life would look like if people could not communicate verbally. Dakowska (2005) claims that speaking is now the most emphasized skill in foreign language teaching, but unfortunately, it is also recognized as the most difficult to develop in classroom conditions. Students are constantly encouraged to use the target language during classes, but when the lesson is over, they cannot use it in real communication. Some students seek opportunities to practice their foreign language outside the classroom; however, only some attempt to practice the target language (Ur, 1996). Indeed, one of the disadvantages of teaching English as a foreign language is that students need to use the language in everyday speech. Speaking a foreign language means interacting with people in authentic situations, not only during classroom-controlled speaking activities. Therefore, teachers' task to develop that skill is highly challenging and requires much time, as learners may only succeed by practice (Harmer, J, 2012). In most schools, however, communicative efficiency is still not a priority. In most classes, teachers fail to provide students with activities that reflect genuine interaction. Students rarely talk to one another, and even fewer have the opportunity to talk to a teacher (Gobio, 1991).

2.3 A SUCCESSFUL SPEAKING LESSON

2.3.1 INTERACTION

One of the essential steps in presenting the principles of a good lesson is the interaction between students. The key to a successful speaking lesson is a successful speaking activity. Nonetheless, it might be challenging to design, so teachers should be familiar with the basic characteristics of a profitable oral exercise. Learners should have a chance to talk using the target language (Ur, 1996). Although still possible, what is difficult to achieve is the desire to have the time devoted to such an activity filled with learner talking time to the maximum (Doff, 1988). What a teacher can do to promote speaking is to divide students into groups. Working in groups increases the amount of practice learners can get and the amount of their speaking. When students sit in a small circle, their inhibitions are lowered, and they are encouraged to speak. Nevertheless, it is more natural for them to speak in their mother tongue than in the target language, so teachers very often keep on reminding learners to use L2 (Dobson, 1989).

2.3.2 EQUAL PARTICIPATION

Another feature of a successful speaking activity, highlighted by Brown (2001), is even participation. All students should get a chance to speak; moreover, contributions should be fairly evenly distributed. Therefore, teachers' task is to strive towards engaging the less active learners and make sure that all students are involved similarly. Additionally, a task should be unrestricted by a few students who like to take control of an exercise. Dobson (1989) suggests that in order to make sure that every learner can practice the target language, the teacher can appoint a group representative responsible for equal participation among peers.

2.3.3 THE ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF THE LANGUAGE USED

Another critical principle mentioned by Ur (1996) is the acceptable level of the language used. An educator can achieve it by selecting activities whose language level is similar to the students' linguistic level. Such oral tasks empower students and allow learners to express their ideas and opinions through fluent speech clearly.

2.3.4 MOTIVATION

The last but not the least important principle mentioned by Ur (1996) is motivation. It plays a vital role in a successful lesson devoted to speaking. Motivation has too many definitions, but it is essential to focus on those related to education (Dakowska, 2005). It is considered a key factor that pushes a student to act or do a particular task enjoyably in the classroom. This need and desire energize and direct students' behavior towards positive participation in the learning process. Besides, motivation is defined as the voluntary use of high-level self-regulated learning strategies such as paying attention, connecting, planning, and monitoring. This means that motivation plays an essential role in the learning process. That is to say, when students are highly motivated, they can be actively engaged in the learning process and set for themselves the learning strategies to help them learn better. They can also take the initiative and responsibility for what occurs in the classroom by selecting, managing, and evaluating their learning strategies.

2.4 ROLE-PLAY DEFINITION

Because there is no precise definition of role-playing, various authors see it differently. According to Porter-Ladousse (1987: 3), "role-play activities range from highly-controlled guided conversations at one end of the scale, to improvised drama activities at the other; from simple rehearsed dialogue performance, to highly complex simulated scenarios." The author of these words puts much emphasis on a broad scope of role-play activities. Such a speaking task may be limited and supported by prepared cues, such as dialogues; conversely, role-playing may be an activity in which students prefer to improvise rather than rely on the practiced dialogue (Huang, 2008). Porter-Ladousse (1987) also points out that role-play may differ in complexity; some performances may be concise and simple, whereas some utterances may be very structured. The difficulty of the activity depends, therefore, on the language level.

Gobio (1987) indicates that in role-play, learners are given a task to complete, and in order to do it, they are told who they are, what their opinions are, and what they know that is unknown to the other students. She stresses that students are told who they are, namely, that they play the role of somebody else. Being cast in the role of a different character may diminish the fear of speaking, as these are not the speakers who make mistakes but the personalities they play (Budden, J, 2004). The critical feature of role-play is that learners can become anyone they want for a short time. Their task is to pretend to be a different person, and it may be, for example, a doctor, a pop star, a parent, and a millionaire (Porter-Ladousse, 1987).

2.4.1 THE ORGANISATION OF A ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY

For a role-play to be a successful speaking exercise, it is helpful to know some basic principles about organizing such an activity. Firstly, it is important to mention that if a teacher is not convinced about the validity of using role-playing, the activity itself "will fall flat on its face just as you expected it to" (Porter-Ladousse 1987: 8). The educator has to be convinced that role-playing is an exciting technique to use and has many benefits. If the teacher is not enthusiastic about the play, the students will not be as well (Scrivener, 2005).

Any teaching sequence requires three vital elements: the engage stage, the study stage, and the activate stage. In the first phase, the engage stage, the teacher's task is to attract and keep learners' attention and interest in a lesson. Students' minds must be involved and emotionally connected with a lesson, for example, by a pleasant situation or a nice picture (Harmer, 2012). Then, learners need to study the new language, grammar, or vocabulary exercises. Having learned the new item, students can activate both the new language and the language they already know. Learners do it when they speak freely. Having been engaged, being presented with the new language, and having practiced it, learners try to activate it. Students are presented with the new language, they practice it, and, finally, they make an effort to produce the new language or any language (Thornbury, 2005).

Doff (1988) states that if role-play is not based on a course book or text dialogue, students themselves have to decide what language to use and how a conversation should develop. Therefore, for role-playing to be profitable, careful preparation would be essential. The educator may stimulate classroom discussion about what the speakers may say. Also, writing prompts on a

board, and necessary vocabulary may guide students during role-play. Budden (2004) adds that drilling the structures the players would need to use is very helpful, as learners are equipped with suitable language.

It is also worth remembering that the teacher should make sure that students understand both the situation to be played and also what is on the role cards before the activity begins. If learners follow the activity, they can properly conduct it. Of course, role cards should be legible and within students' language level. Moreover, educators should not use too tricky or too emotionally taxing role-plays until students are used to that activity. Instead, starting with simple information-gap role-plays is advisable (Al-Arishi & Yaha, 1994). During the first role-play, learners may be more or less inhibited, but soon they will get accustomed to role-playing (Porter-Ladousse, 1987).

Beyond question, students will need time to prepare for a performance and try out their roles privately. Depending on the learners' language level, the amount of planning time may differ. Players at this stage of an activity work in pairs or groups and discuss what they might say. At higher levels, students will not need much help with the language but time to get into roles (Doff, 1988). Equally importantly, realia can help to bring role-play to life. For instance, when playing the roles of a waiter and a customer, learners might be asked to do or bring to class menus and aprons. These simple props may make the whole process more memorable for the class (Budden, 2004). The author also states that rearranging the furniture helps with playing the roles. She gives an example of playing the roles of a travel agent and a customer; to make it more realistic, students may even leave the room and then enter by knocking at the door. One desk may be put in the center of a classroom to act as a travel agency, too.

Next, Doff (1988) explains that the demonstration of role-play is significant. The educator's task is to tell the class the situation to play in and do the exercise. The teacher may also elicit some structures that would be used in an activity. Having explained the whole task, the lecturer divides the class into pairs or groups. At the very end, she or he sets a strict time limit and tries to make every effort to stick to it.

Finally, Huang (2008) proposes that the teacher assess the role-play activity's effectiveness and examine if learners have successfully comprehended the meaning of vocabulary, sentences, and dialogues. The author adds that there are several ways to check students' evaluations. She suggests that learners should be given oral and listening tests related to role-plays. The players may be asked to answer questions connected with their roles, repeat some parts of utterances, or translate the role-play into their native language. Apart from that, the teacher's task is to evaluate students' understanding and comprehension while monitoring their role-play performances (Dakowska, 2005).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study is to investigate teachers' views on role-play activities and the extent to which the latter can develop students' speaking competence.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010: 22), "the research design describes how the study is conducted, and the purpose of a research design is to indicate a plan that will generate evidence that will be able to answer the research questions." This research is based on a qualitative research method using two semi-structured interviews to collect data.

3.2 RESEARCH SAMPLE

The current study was conducted in a middle school in Sidi Slimane. A class of the 9th-grade level consisting of 30 students is divided into small groups, and each group is given a play to memorize and perform in the class for the coming week.

3.3 MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

The current study uses two semi-structured interviews. One is designed for teachers teaching the 9th-grade level to know their views and attitudes towards using role-plays as a teaching method in their classes. The other one is designed for students so that the researcher can examine the relationship between role-play activities and students' speaking competence. These two research methods are meant to collect data and find answers to the research questions.

3.4   DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

After the experiment, six participants were selected to answer the semi-structured interview questions. The primary purpose was to extrapolate students' views about the relationship between role-play activities and their linguistic competence. Then, five teachers of English language from three middle schools were selected to answer the semi-structured interview questions about their views and attitudes about using role-plays as a teaching method in their teaching process.

4   RESULTS

4.1   STUDENTS'SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The interview questions seek to get the respondents' views and feelings about the experience of practicing speaking through role-play activities.

The main questions addressed in the semi-structured interview are:

a)   Did you participate in the role-play activity ?
b)   Did the role-play activity make you involved in the learning process ? If yes, why ? If not, why ?
c)   Did you enjoy speaking in English while practicing the role-play activity ? If yes, how ? If not, why not ?
d)   Do you think practicing such a kind of activities can develop your speaking skills? If yes, why?
e)   How often do you like your teacher to use role-play activities in the classroom?
f)   If you were a teacher, do you prefer to use role-play activities to encourage your students to speak? If yes, why?

The findings of the semi-structured interview questions indicate that all the interviewees (N = 6, 100%) eagerly participated in the role-play activity because they were given the freedom to practice English with their classmates in a joyful way. One of the respondents says that the role-play activity helped him practice speaking English and learn some vocabulary while speaking. Another respondent clarified that the role-play activity was an excellent opportunity for him to interact with his classmates using English, which motivated him to practice speaking English with his friends outside the classroom. Rachida, one of the respondents, adds, "I beg my teacher to use such activities all the time so that we can develop our speaking." Ahmed, another respondent, confirms that if he were a teacher, he would always use role-plays in his classroom so that learners could freely participate in the learning process and practice English with their classmates. He adds that even though his students would make errors in terms of grammar or pronunciation, he would not interfere. Another respondent, Mina, clarified that from the role-play activity session, she learned how to learn and pronounce new vocabulary, adding that that session was joyful and entertaining because all students were freely speaking English without the teacher's interference.

4.2   TEACHERS'SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The questions of the interview seek to get teachers' views and feelings about using role-play activities in their classrooms.

The main questions addressed in the semi-structured interview are:

a)   What do you think about role-play activities ?
b)   How often do you use role-play activities ?
c)   Do you think role-play activities a good teaching method for developing students' speaking competence ?
d)   Are there any other teaching activities beside role-plays that can develop students speaking skills ?

The findings of the semi-structured interview questions indicate that all the interviewees (N = 5, 100%) agree that using role-plays in the teaching process is suitable for developing students' speaking skills. Rachid explains, "Using role-plays in the classroom allows students to express themselves freely and practice English in an authentic context'. Adam adds that he always uses role-plays in his teaching process to help his students develop their speaking skills, foster their imagination, and break the monotony in the classroom. Concerning Khalid, he says, "Role-play activities, like other communicative activities, such as problem-based activities, project-based activities, and task-based activities, are a good teaching method teachers should rely on to help their students develop their communicative competence. Khalid confirms that role-play activities are essential in teaching/learning to have learners speak English fluently, adding that he usually uses them with his students. In that, Hamza supports all that has been mentioned earlier, suggesting that teachers should consider this teaching method as one of the leading teaching methods for speaking development.

5   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the students' semi-structured interviews show that students are highly motivated by such activities. They found it entertaining because they enjoyed themselves and had a great time. They all stated that the role-play activities allowed them to practice English with their classmates and improve their speaking skills. Besides, this activity allowed them to talk in English freely with their classmates in the classroom without any obstacles. Concerning the findings of the teachers' semi-structured interviews, they indicate that all the teachers interviewed in the current study agree that role-plays are suitable teaching methods that educators should use in their classes to encourage learners to communicate in English. According to their answers, role-play activities help learners enlarge their imaginations, learn different vocabulary, and develop their communicative competence. The present study's findings are supported by the literature review, which indicates that role-playing develops learners' fluency in speaking. In other words, the wide range of language functions, for example, apologizing, greetings, etc., is exercised more than in any other activity. To be clear, learners focus on the communication of meaning rather than on the appropriate use of language. Therefore, through role-playing, teachers may train students' speaking skills in any social situation. It means that learners are put in conditions that require speech that is used to communicate socially more than the language necessitated by teaching syllabuses. Besides, role-playing develops learners' imaginations. The roles given to learners may require creative thinking, so the players' imagination is in high demand. Moreover, learners are given a chance to pretend to be someone else. Such a technique may help timid students overcome their shyness about speaking. Reticent students often have difficulty talking about their experiences or themselves. The fact that they are someone else makes them feel that their personality is not implicated.

Based on the current study's findings and the literature review, it is concluded that role-playing activities are one of the communicative activities that can create a motivating learning environment where all students can develop their speaking skills. In addition, while using this teaching activity in the classroom, students can defy their shyness and eagerly participate in developing their English language skills through learning different vocabulary in an authentic context. Therefore, it is suggested that educators should give play-based learning great importance if they want to develop their students' speaking competence.

REFERENCES

[1]   Al-Arishi & Yaha, 1994. «Role-play, real- play, and surreal-play in the ESOL classroom», ELT Journal 48, 4: 337-345.
[2]   Brown & Yule, 1983. Teaching the spoken language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[3]   Budden, J, 2004. «Role play», British Council (http://www.teachenglish.org. uk/think/articles/role-play) (date of access: 1 April 2013).
[4]   Crystal, David. 2008. A Dictionary of linguistics and phonetics. (6th edition.) Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
[5]   Dakowska, 2005. Teaching English as a foreign language: A guide for professionals. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
[6]   Dobson, 1989. Effective techniques for English conversation groups. Washington, D.C. 20547: English Language Programs Division Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs United States Information Agency.
[7]   Doff, 1988. Teach English: A training course for teachers: Trainer's Handbook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[8]   Fromkin & Hyamas, 2003. An introduction to language. (7th edition.) Thomson Wadsworth.
[9]   Gołębio, 1987. Let's talk: A book for teachers. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.
[10] Harmer, J, 2001. The practice of English language teaching. Harlow: Longman.
[11] Harmer, J, 2012. Essential teacher knowledge. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
[12] Huang, 2008. «Role play for ESL/EFL Children in the English Classroom», The Internet TESL Journal. (http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Huang-RolePlay.html) (date of access: 1 April 2013).
[13] Kowalska, 1991. Let them talk in English. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.
[14] Porter-Ladousse, 1987. Role play. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[15] Richards & Bohlke, 2011. Creative effective language lessons. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[16] Scrivener, J, 2005. Learning teaching. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
[17] Tarone & Yule, 1989. Focus on the language learner: Approaches to identifying and meeting the needs of second language learners. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[18] Thornbury, 2005. How to teach speaking. London: Pearson Education Limited.
[19] Ur, 1996. A course in language teaching: Practice and theory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[20] Widdowson, 1978. Teaching language as communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[21] Yule, 2006. The study of language. (3rd edition.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.