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

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Abstract

The trend towards globalization is intensifying and English, as a universal language, plays an important role in communication throughout the world. English as a communication tool is often learnt by non-native speakers in conversation with people. Mastering communication skills can help students acquire language in their language learning, and the significance of language learning is to enable students to use the language appropriately to communicate, so mastering communication skills is very important in English learning process. The use of the role-play method in teaching English can effectively improve students' overall language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while also improving students' pragmatic skills and helping them to master communicative skills.

Keywords

Role-play Activity, Communicative Skills, Effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, role-playing is a popular teaching method among English teachers and secondary school students. In English lessons, the teacher design and make a context and then invites the students to play one or two roles in a hypothetical setting, carry out role-playing tasks in the context and perform the movements of these characters. Students can have an immersive experience in the process of using language and exposure to culture of foreign countries while completing their learning objectives. The aim of learning through role-play is to improve their speaking, writing, reading and some communicative skills. The role-play method allows students to experience, understand, apply and integrate newly acquired knowledge in a real-life situation. In role-play activity, students often have to play the role fabricated based on prototypes in their real life, conducting dialogues and conversations between teachers and students, using their communication skills to communicate appropriately on the basis of their command of the language, which improves linguistic fluency, strengthens communication and trains interpersonal skills.

When organizing the practice of role-play, the teacher must provide a context and several materials and roles designing for students to prepare, practice and then perform in the class. The performance can be developed by several groups. When one is performing, the other students are audience and discuss its advantages and disadvantages. The discussion itself is also a kind of practice.

The specificity of the role-play method is that it stimulates students' learning initiative. They play various roles, actively participate in thematic situations and complete learning tasks. In this process, students can gain experience in language use naturally and deepen their understanding of some language points and knowledge of the theme of the story, which helps to improve their oral skills and improve the learning effect of the course.

2. Effectiveness of a role-play activity in practicing EFL learner's communicative skills

Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of teaching pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and a lot of fun. The role-playing activities incorporate all four skills, enabling students to develop their general language skills, improve and gain confidence. They also help students develop communication skills such as conveying information and using non-verbal language. Role play is believed to be the ultimate integration of all four language skills in English. Students have been shown to gain confidence and familiarity with English and improve their language skills through preparing and producing a play performance. There are many aspects of effectiveness of role play in improving students' communicative skills.

The first aspect is about acquiring knowledge of language points in role play which are the foundation of successful communication.

A smooth conversation requires rich storage of expressions presented in the form of words and phrases. Take the accumulation of vocabulary as an example. Role-playing is a learning strategy that models vocabulary learning in an economical, controlled, and fun way for both students and teachers[2]. Learning vocabulary is very important in English lessons, but it is not enough to know the meaning vocabulary, it also needs to be used in different situations. Through role-play, students learn words and their meanings, derivation patterns, grammatical and social usages gradually and naturally through various strategies, exercises, and drills so that they can use vocabulary appropriately and effectively in real-life situations. They relate the meaning of words with emotions and deep their understanding of the pragmatic use of these words through playing specific roles, thus they have a comprehensive understanding of these words and expressions . Gradually they are able to use English appropriately and correctly in different contexts. It is obvious that role play can reduce the risk of communication breakdown or misunderstanding. In role playing activities, students play different roles and conduct dialogues, using words[80]. This can help students broaden their knowledge of expressions. Many English expressions are very different from Chinese and need to be emphasized in the learning process. However, students easily forget them if they rely solely on the teacher's accents. The best way is to allow them to feel and understand them for themselves. In traditional teaching, students only get opportunities to do mechanical drills, they do not have the necessary conditions to feel them. The role-playing method provides a more favorable environment for experiential learning. During the role-play, students can discover the characteristics of English expressions. This will enable them to express themselves correctly in the future.

Role-playing activities can also enhance students' knowledge of English culture by allowing students to immersing in a foreign language environment[80]. Students get to know the cultural differences between China and foreign countries and some background information. Role-playing activities are often centered on a certain theme, and the smooth running of the activities requires students to have a certain degree of understanding of the subject matter of the activity and to have relevant cultural background knowledge. The cultural knowledge reserve can avoid the phenomenon of cultural conflict and provide a guarantee for the smooth running of communication activities. If students do not understand the differences between English and Chinese, they will make many idiomatic mistakes or even create their own English expressions, which will cause jokes in the learning process. Students can acquire humanistic knowledge in the role experience. They know some knowledge about interpersonal relationships and social skills and principles in playing roles.

The second aspect is about settling contexts for communication occurrences and offering students experience close to their life.

Contexts and situations closer to real life motivate students to participate in activities and learning and encourage to express themselves. When teachers design a role play activity, they are likely to choose topics and set contexts that are relevant to real life which not only provides students with engagement in role-play, but also contributes to the development of their life skills. The resources used in role-play are usually very close to students' lives. These resources are appropriate for students considering their knowledge background and competence level, reducing barriers of fluent conversation. When role-playing, the language used by the pupils is not limited to language knowledge they have learnt in class, but incorporates all the knowledge they have acquired including some words, expressions, cultural knowledge, interpersonal knowledge, and common sense. Students are free from the constraints of the textbook. The use of role-playing allows second language learners to experience many types of real-life situations in which they will use the language and words and if they develop a sense of mastery, they should be able to apply the language to new situations more easily. Student have similar communicative experience before. Thus, they are encouraged to use some natural expression and intonation of native speakers as well as gestures they learned in previous similar contexts. And some social skills in role play activity increases motivation, develops creativity, fosters interaction, encourages peer learning, and helps learners to communicate more freely.

The third aspect is about training students language skills and other skills.

The desire to introduce role-playing games into the classroom is due to their effectiveness for teaching in a fun and motivating way. Through this activity, students learn to listen, participate in and understand narrative discourse, and develop a pathway to more sophisticated use of language, reading and writing in their daily lives. This activity encourages students to explore their expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner. Becoming verbally proficient can contribute to a student's ability to communicate effectively and successfully. Being able to accurately express one's thoughts and feelings is important in everyday communication.

Besides, it can also encourage students to use some non-verbal gestures to express meaning in role play activity. Student gain their non-verbal communication skills.

Role-playing can improve learners' general pragmatic skills. Role plays have a high recreation of communicative situations and give students the opportunity to experience communication by simulating real communicative scenes. Role-plays combine the textbook and the students' real lives to develop scenarios and roles, with the scenarios linked to the students' real lives and the roles linked to the students' lives. Linguistic communication in the simulated role-plays and real-life scenarios is taught to produce correct knowledge of the rules of communication. Role play activity mainly conducted in the form of conversation. The relaxed atmosphere and lively environment created by stories encourages students to talk and discuss with each other. Role-playing is practically the only way to practice spoken English in real life, including paradigmatic and sociolinguistic aspects. In other words, role-playing games enable learners to produce language in different contexts and situations so that they can imitate shopkeepers and shoppers, tourists, and other people. It makes the opportunities to speak oral English maximum, so that students' oral communication skills can be greatly improved. Each student has the opportunity to take part in activities, to speak English, to improve their linguistic awareness and fluency and to significantly increase their language skills[6]. Pupils acquire knowledge of oral communication and apply what they have learned in dialogues and performances, which in the long run enables them to form the habit of communicating orally and improve their overall language skills. Becoming verbally proficient can contribute to a student's ability to communicate effectively and successfully. When they perform and speak more, they are able to accurately express one's thoughts and feelings. They gain confidence in expressing and get increasingly used to using English. Besides the four basic language skills , they are exposed to

many other skills like negotiation, discussion and cooperation. Role-play contains a playful element that contrasts with textbook exercises and promotes the development of relationships between learners. Role-playing games are very interactive, fun and interesting and can create a lively,active,creative and relaxed atmosphere for language learning. They can increase learners' interest in participating in communication. They can promote interaction between lecturers and students. Compared with traditional language learning lectures, role-plays in the form of talks, speeches, and other forms of interaction between teachers and students can maximize the interaction between teachers and students. Let students take turns playing the main character to initiate dialogue communication in explaining the plot and continuing the story, and integrate the grammatical knowledge and sentence patterns of this unit to overcome learning difficulties. This way of teaching can not only improve students' language expression ability, but also cultivate students' teamwork ability. Role playing combining with real life allows students to feel the interest and practical significance of learning English, as well as to increase their motivation for learning. Students with different levels of language proficiency learn to use different ways of expressing themselves in the process of interaction, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses, subtly influencing each other and improving their communicative skills. Students perform various tasks in the process of communication and cooperation, develop a sense of cooperation, interpersonal communication and coordination and other aspects of skills, and improve social skills.

There are still many other aspects of effectiveness as following.

The activity is accessible to students of all ages and abilities. The materials are easy to collect, and the Internet and many other media can be used to collect information without the need for specific tools, and role play activity can be organized anytime and anywhere. Role-playing activities for language learners, with second language learners as the main center, can enhance students' autonomy in learning, acquire communicative knowledge and develop long-term learning habits for lifelong learning. Pupils are active learners and participants in role play. With the help of information technology,teachers are able to promote the process of the activities, to enhance the effect of the performance, to provide students with a good experience of the activities, to deepen the students' understanding of the different roles, the understanding of the communication.

3. Conclusion

In teaching practice, teachers should correctly assess the importance of communicative competence and lay stress on promoting students' overall language competence. The active use of the role-play method in teaching language knowledge and skills enables students to develop in a more complete and holistic way. The role-play method plays an important role in English language teaching. Through role-playing, foreign language learners not only gain a sense of achievement and enjoyment of learning, they also cooperate and communicate with each other, face difficulties and solve problems together in this process. They not only learn new skills, but also make friends and improve their oral communication skills.By optimizing and innovating the teacher's role-play method, it can effectively improve students' level of learning and application of the English language. The role-playing method is beneficial for understanding and memorizing students' linguistic knowledge and improves students' language level by dramatizing certain scenes and characters in conversations in English. In English teaching, the role-based learning strategy should be used to develop students' sense of responsibility, enhance their independent participation, encourage cooperation and timely assessment. In English teaching, the full use of role-based learning strategies is conducive to the development of students' sense of responsibility, the strengthening of the process of independent participation, communication, and cooperation and finally the improvement of English

language proficiency levels. Therefore, English teachers should pay more attention to practical values of role play activity, take it objectively and try to explore more ways of utilizing it in order to optimize and renew the role-play method and improve students' language level and communicative skills.

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