

ROLE-PLAY AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL TO LEARN SPOKEN LANGUAGE AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Task based learning approaches are recommended in the educational setup for language acquisition to improve language skills especially speaking skills. Though technical skills are important for engineers, effective communication skill is required as it is the most powerful element to possess in a skill set of a professional. Recruiters expect candidates to possess excellent communication skills in order to adapt to an international scenario. At the tertiary level of a placement process, diagnostic test is conducted as it has become crucial to assess students' spoken skills in English. 'Communication Skills Laboratory' has been introduced at the University level to enable task based language learning in order to equip students with the required speaking skills. It is rightly pointed out by Byron Gong "Although task –based learning approaches still need much investigation both theoretically and empirically, it is believed that a task-oriented approach is a valid assessment of the productive communicative ability of the test taker" Gong 2008. Further, it is important to establish a comfortable and low-threat learning environment which provides more relaxed ambience for effective acquisition of the language skills. The present paper aims to discuss the significance of English speaking skills for technical students and brings forth an analytical interpretation of role play as a successful task based learning approach for improvising all the four skills of communication.

Introduction

Significance of Introducing Technical English

The teaching of English language in India at the tertiary level is beset with a host of problems which has not even been remotely addressed by the stakeholders in the field of education. After independence, successive education commissions, beginning with 'The Radhakrishnan Commission' of 1948 have put forth recommendations which if had been implemented unanimously in the country could have rid itself of the problems that continue to exist even now. For instance, the class size and structure of the classroom which is a very fundamental aspect of education system have not been solved. Michael West's (1960) description of the '*unfavorable conditions in a typical Indian school classroom*' continues to represent most classrooms of educational institutions at the tertiary level in modern India. By 'unfavorable conditions' it is meant of a class consisting of over 30 pupils, usually 40 or even 50 sitting on congested benches, (not sitting at individual or dual desks) accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room. Carless (2002) had supported Michael West's stand by stating that 'conditions for task-based learning are not particularly favorable. Average class sizes in primary schools are around

36 pupils per class, and classrooms are usually cramped, spartan, and with inadequate storage space'. In the recent times, the teaching instruction method of English Language in India from the elementary level to tertiary level is structured and regulated by political will than by academicians, ELT practitioners and other stakeholders to a large extent. Whereas in the mid eighties, the establishment of language laboratories when first introduced in schools and colleges did not have the political reaction that it enjoys today.

The resurgence in the renewal of the language laboratories in schools and colleges in Tamilnadu took place in the late nineties. It was done with renewed rigor and urgency in all schools. The state board schools especially were sanctioned funds for setting up the language laboratories. In colleges across the state, (both arts and science colleges and engineering institutions) the language laboratory has metamorphosed into a 'communication' laboratory, and in some places into 'self access language learning centers'. This was done primarily with the intention of enhancing the speaking and listening skill in English of engineering students. The English language course offered to the students in the fifth and sixth semesters is a lab- based course and the syllabus complements scrupulous practice of speaking and listening in the lab.

As stated earlier, the setting up of the language laboratories in engineering institutions across the state could have been political but the language laboratory has definitely helped students especially those from 'mother tongue medium based' schools. According to Carless (2002), 'use of the first language or code-switching from mother tongue to the target language or vice versa is a common feature in EFL world-wide, and is a natural act which, if used judiciously by teachers or pupils, seems to make a positive contribution to the learning process'. The language laboratory has been instrumental in helping these students shed their shyness and inhibitions through task based exercises in learning the language. In a country like India where over three- fourths of the population continues to live in dire poverty, the ambience of the language laboratory with its air conditioned environment has inculcated anticipation in students to look forward to the lab sessions and give their best by participating enthusiastically in the activities. The language teacher plays a pivotal role in presenting the lab sessions with a motivating and appealing tone for the students to be fully engaged. Due to the mushrooming of the IT and ITes sector in India, there is a pressing need to equip the student in the spoken language.

'Technical English Course' for engineering students was introduced by Anna university, Tamilnadu for the undergraduate students of BE/B. Tech degree program in their first year and their skills learnt would be examined in the first and second end-semester examination. The aim of the course was to facilitate the students to improve their competence in communication in their workplace. The focus of the course design was to equip the students in all the four skills of language (LSRW)

to meet the professional demands and also to inculcate interpersonal communication skills in English. But over the years, though the syllabus had all the four skills of the language, the testing was and is done only on reading and writing skill. As a result of the course, students are equipped with the knowledge of grammar, letter writing, giving instructions, suggesting recommendations etc.

Communication Skills Laboratory

In the year 2006, Anna University mandated Communication Skills Laboratory in the third year of the course. As per the guidelines, the Communication Skills Laboratory had to be equipped with the required configuration namely, Hi-class software, LCD projectors, mike, video camera and a Television. The lab was distinguished into English lab and Career lab wherein the English lab had the lab sessions and the career lab had sessions on PPT presentations and group discussions. Examination is held at the end of the semester with the English lab component comprising of reading, listening and common errors in English whereas speaking skills are tested in the Career lab. (The syllabus copy of the ‘Communication Skills Course’ is annexed for reference.

During the course, reading, listening exercises, phonetics, intonation, stress pattern are taught by means of *Globarena* and *Toefl* mastery software in the language laboratory. In the career lab, students are trained in presentation, group discussion and interview skills to meet the requirements of the prospective employment. The curriculum also comprises of certain task-based learning concepts to improvise the oratorical and social skills of the students which has also been proved successful in real time practices.

Task based learning primarily encourages appropriate completion of real world tasks rather than on accuracy of prescribed language forms. Wigglesworth (2008;117) an ELT specialist also has expressed the same views with regard to task based teaching and testing of English language skills “A central tenet of task-based language assessments is that the tasks are designed to represent authentic activities which test candidates might be expected to encounter in the real world outside the classroom.”

Related Review

In the article “Role play in science teaching and learning” by Mcsharry *et al.*, the author reveals how role play is the product of the three components namely play, games, simulations resulting in learning outcomes when the student is asked to perform in his/her classrooms. He also emphasizes the fact that role plays could be the best form of experiential learning if they are initiated and designed by the teacher in science education. The general misconception that role play cannot be used to educate scientific concepts is not agreed by the author. He says the desire to play and therefore to learn is a fundamental part of a human psychology and is

a potentially powerful resource residing in the children themselves (Mcsharey et al). According to Lori Jarvis (2002), 'there is increased involvement on the part of the students in a role playing lesson. Students are not passive recipients of the instructor's knowledge. Rather, they take an active part'.

The reasons behind these suggestions to employ role play in science classes are as follows:

- It evolves learners and students to give a feeling of 'ownership' of their education as he involves himself in facilitating his own education by writing a script to the role play or improvise the existing model etc., for instance description of the way the planets revolves around the sun etc.,
- He recommends the ideology of Watson (1985) that it helps the teacher a good option of linking the work with the more feeling, creative side of education and as a method of increasing the manipulation of factual material by children.
- It acts as a platform to teach about moral or ethical values or issues arising from the curriculum like conducting debates on genetically manipulated food production or the arguments for/against opening up a new quarry in the schools' playing field.
- Giving a chance to experience certain situations of loaded theories comprising complicated scientific ideas in a physical way which may be more appropriate to their personal learning style.
- As more the technique/analogy is used in explaining the concepts children end up conceptualizing their ideas and thereby resulting in the highest degree/form of learning.

Unless the teaching methodology embraces a wide variety of techniques any pupil/student whose style does not match is likely to be disadvantage. (Lawrence, 1997).

In the article "New approaches to role play in the communication classroom" by Paul Mason, the author brings out the benefits of psychological and recreational effects of using role plays in classrooms. He further believes that by immersion or involving the students wholly in their roles results in a heightened sense of concentration. Thereby it creates an environment of greater involvement and motivation in acquiring the comprehensible input of learning a language. He also suggests that a teacher can engage himself/herself in a best interactive situation when she changes her role to a referee and guide them in all the paths to bring a good teaching and learning experience to her students. To bring real success the author suggests that if students are allowed to be imaginative and if there is more freedom of play rather than prosaic and uninvolved topics, every role play would turn out to be a yield of greater reward. According to Poorman, (2002), when role-play is used in a school setting, students extend their knowledge of a subject by

researching a character within a given course of study. Student interest is raised in subject matter, thus generating interest within the subject.

In role-playing the student is representing and experiencing a character known in everyday life (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). The use of role-playing emphasizes personal concerns, problems, behavior, and active participation (Silver & Silver, 1989). It improves interpersonal skills (Teahan, 1975), improves communication skills (Huyack, 1975), and enhances communication (Ettkin & Snyder, 1972).

In the paper “Role play in English language Teaching” by Liu and et.al, the author reemphasizes the fact that by employing role plays as an activity in the classroom, it could bring a great change in the teaching and learning process. He states that it is one of the effective strategies to animate the task of language acquisition in the regular English classroom. Further the author tries to arrive at a concrete solution to the various issues raised by researches in the analysis of proving role plays to be the best language teaching method. He brings out some of the best results he has experimented in his research while practicing role play. They are as follows:

- Vocabulary is best learnt and applied while performing role plays compared to a single practice of recitation
- Grammar is not considered as the ultimate result of language production but a good language is expected to elicit and bring forth the real-life like dialogues with a pattern of sentences like exclamation, elliptical forms, interrogatives etc.
- More than 80% of the students could fluently talk and enact in the role play with lot of insight into the appropriate language properties combined with their imaginations and intelligence.
- A well arranged discussion was plausible as the students observed others perform and proffered feedbacks and thereby were able to share their opinions and appreciations. (Steindorf, 2001) pointed out that ‘students become active participants in their education rather than passive observers’. It allows students to feel empathy for others when portraying a character’.

As a conclusion, the author suggests four steps to make a successful outcome in any activity based English classrooms. They are as follows:

- The teacher should take the effort to portray the real life situation in the given activity. According to Poorman (2002), ‘Role-playing as a teaching strategy offers several advantages for both teacher and student. First, student interest in the topic is raised. Research has shown that “integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject matter and understanding of course content”’.
- At the appropriate situation the teacher should step-in to guide her pupils while enacting the role play.

- In a gentle but at the right junctures he/she should interrupt and correct mistakes and errors after observation.
- She has to take the role of a facilitator, spectator or sometimes to initiate, to involve, to bring life onto the drama and therefore the students could participate enthusiastically taking up a role and perform.

Task Based Learning (TBL)

Before getting into the topic of Task Based Learning approach, let us discuss on the definitions of a task based approach for a better understanding.

Nunan (1989) describes task based approach as “A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.” Another ELT specialist (Gong 2008) defines task as a type of speaking test involving performance in a test of productive skills, whose main purpose is to elicit an examinees’ English language ability. Further he states a task refers to a given topic that an examinee is expected to talk about, so that his/her language ability can be assessed, rather than the completion of the actual task itself.”

Task Based Learning is effective for communication language teaching. It is contrary to the teacher centered approach wherein the student is left with no choices other than an artificial situation, often with drills and already structured dialogues are practiced. In the Indian scenario TBL is an upcoming new element as it is becoming popular and has garnered considerable changes in the teaching methodology. The concept has also influenced syllabus designing, classroom teaching and assessment of learners. TBL is practiced in school classrooms as well as in colleges. The most important criteria aiding in TBL is learner-centered and also is fun to learn.

According to Carless (2002), Task-based learning has become orthodoxy in contemporary EFL teaching and in recent years has been exported to many countries around the globe. Nunan (2004) tries to enumerate some of the key factors in his book ‘Task Based Language Teaching’. He deems that TBL is ideal for selecting content for a need based language as there is emphasis on ‘learning to communicate through interaction in the target language’ and ‘introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation’. TBL offers ‘provisions of opportunities for learners’ and ‘provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself’. It acknowledges ‘enhancement of the learners’ own personal experiences as contributing elements to classroom learning and linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan, 2004).

Some of the components of TBL are:

- Setting goals and objectives to develop communicative ability of the learner.

- Input is rendered by teacher by giving a sketch of how things should be approached and selected for performance.
- Activation -children get themselves to undergo rehearsals and regressive practice.
- Teachers take different roles unlike traditional ones and thus act as good guide, counselor, evaluator etc.
- Learners' role differ from his routine self and thus act as an independent learner, material and course designer, self evaluator, peer advisor etc...
- Settings - creating an infrastructure with all the equipment like hi-class software, LCD projector, and a comfortable ambience of an air-conditioned room where the student can work towards a better goal of achieving efficiency in their language skills.

Subsequently in the language laboratory the researcher observed and found that of all activities and TBL like GD, Jam, debate, miming etc, role play emerged as one of the effective task, that could support not only linguistic competence of the language learner but also develop communicative ability of the learners.

Role-Play

Role play is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models (Joyce and Weil, 2000). Role play advocates a natural method which recommends a process of learners' discovery through trial and error. The ultimate goal achievement in acquiring language proficiency and fluency is supported. Here the researcher would like to bring forth Krashen's (1987) theory of language acquisition called comprehensible input (i+1) where it is expected that the four skills are supportive to combine the existing knowledge in the learner and eventually results in the understanding of the target language.

The benefits of using a role play are innumerable and fruitful. Firstly the reader is exposed to true learning where he is not made a passive observer but an active participant. According to Jones (1982) "students must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves". It helps the learner bring life to the written forms and immediacy to academic material which most of the time lies in the form of theory and is not utilized for any practical. It can encourage student to empathize with the position and feelings of others which is in fact missed in the normal course of a teaching learning environment.

Role-play enhances clarity in understanding, interest to participate and confidence to perform in students. Fogg (2001) 'tells of a college professor who felt that his history classes were boring and not involving the students. After trying out a role-playing type game one semester, he observed that students were much more interested in the material'. It helps learners to empathize with the role he/she

enacts and thus motivates the learner to have a better understanding of real-time problems and the solutions. It helps students practice speaking skills like debating, enacting, reasoning and negotiating. Moreover it also helps them to adapt to unexpected situations in real-life. As Lucantoni (2002) points out, “role play can be very enjoyable for learners and provides excellent opportunities for using language in real life situations. It is a communicative activity where the learners can use spontaneous language .It also helps learners to develop real life speaking skills. Ments (1999) pointed out “role play lends well to mixed ability groups and that it provides learners with opportunities to practice and develop communication strategies”

The role-playing approach can be used in a variety of settings, including the classroom. The principle behind role-playing is that the student assumes a particular personality of a different person, such as a historical character. According to Jones (1982), students “must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions, and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves”. The researcher carried out a role play exercise in her lab class ,comprising of 60 students who were doing their third year of the BE/Btech programme . The aim of introducing role play to the students was to promote LSRW skills and also to actively involve students in speaking. The class was a mixed group who were divided into teams of six. The students were selected randomly for each group. . Each group consisted of good, average and below average student based on academic marks. The groups were allowed to choose a topic of their own choice from a broader frame work. In one such activity, the teacher suggested a letter writing exercise depicting incidents of ragging, eve-teasing, corruption etc. which takes place in day-to-day life. This idea of engaging students in an appropriate activity was taken from Cameron’s concept. He pointed out that similar to any learning method the choice of role play must be “appropriate for the children’s age and social –cultural experience” (Cameron, 2001: 30).

In the letter writing exercise, it was instructed that the letter had to be addressed to the editor of a newspaper either voicing their opinion over the issue or complaining on various social issues . The students were allowed to browse through resources like magazines, online news reports, etc. as a pre-task activity. The students came prepared for a discussion and presented their views in the next class. In another session, the students enacted the entire issue / topics through a skit which successfully facilitated participation from all the students. Each student had a role to play and the students enacted the character very imaginatively and active participation was resulted. Each group presented the skit for duration of 15 minutes. After the skit was enacted by each group, the floor was thrown open to the rest of the audience groups for following discussions and related queries. The feedback was given by the group that enacted and at this moment the teacher also gave her feedback for guidance and improvisation of speaking skills.

The skit was documented and a final written script of the skit was submitted for analysis.

Through the exercise, it was learnt that the role play activity is definitely an extremely gripping and fun filled activity through which the students are able to speak with no inhibition, low feeling or any kind of inferiority complex. As the students enacted the character in the role play, they were totally involved in the grip of the play. They were neither hesitant to make mistakes nor learn from them during the feedback session. The activity adheres and supports the ideology of a casual and natural approach as a great way to practice speaking skills. Through role play, there is a meaningful exposure to all the four skills however speaking skill was primarily exposed more.

Krashens language learning acquisition theory believes that combined input of all the four skills of both productive and receptive skills would help them acquire better understanding and promote them with effective communication to target any kind of testing and evaluation in academic as well as real time situation and issues. These activities enable the students to be part of the reviewing team thereby giving instant peer feedback and opinions that do not affect the morale of the student. As a part of sourcing ideas the students watch television, watch video clippings and listen to music CD. Thus the students are given opportunity to be more responsible to make their own decision thereby encouraging self-directed program rather than teacher directed learning by choosing their own content from the available resources. The ultimate step and goal is to enable every learner become responsible for their own learning which is highly reflected in establishing self access language learning written by Gardner and Miller (1999).

In the class session, reading skill was exercised as they read materials relevant to the context (print material, online material). They also read their own scripts before submitting to the teacher cum researcher as proof-reading exercise. They also read the scripts of other groups as peer assessment. These activities helped the students to be a good critic, assign new roles. As the students are left to observe and watch other teams perform, they are made to listen to various scripts and at the same time given an opportunity to self-monitor their own performances and also to monitor and learn from others. Finally, they had to write and express their original ideas on the concept in a specialized form of writing on a literary genre namely dialogue writing or play writing. Based on the theme and the ideas generated on the whole the students went back to the letter writing exercise and wrote letters to the editor about the issues they had enacted through the role play exercise.

Resources used for the Role Play Exercise

The students were allowed to access the internet in the language laboratory.

The theory underlying this research and the exercise carried out is Krashens (c=i+1) ideology of bringing the concept of comprehensible input (1987). The

role-play enables that learning is fun and performance leads to improved spoken skills.

Limitations of Role-Play

In spite of identifying good feedback of observation and participation from students as a positive side of role play, some factual drawback factors or disadvantages cannot be denied in role play exercise in a learning environment. However a teacher should be conscientious of the drawback factors and take efforts to minimize the drawbacks resulting from the role play exercise.

- Sometimes learners become very self conscious and end up in an embarrassing situation or feeling awkward situations which might result in unproductive performance. As Thornbury (2005) points out “There are learners who feel self conscious performing in front of their peers and care has to be exercised in choosing and setting up such activities.”
- Seedhouse (1999) points out that students often focus principally on task completion, and that as a result, they sometime produce only the most minimal display of linguistic output necessary to complete the task.
- It is practically difficult in high class strength of 60 to perform a role play and assess the outcome of the role-play exercise.
- Sometimes there are passive listeners and as a result a disinterested group distracts the class and stops paying attention to the environment.
- If more students are involved, the role play might become a chaotic mess.
- Adequate teachers’ support and man power is required to bring forth better guidance and support to assist the learners.
- Teachers should be given training programs to equip themselves with the required skills in facilitating a congealing environment and guidance to move the learners for further progress.

The concept of learners’ attorney is sometimes quite shocking and continues to be a surprise for the learners and teachers to accept and probably they end up questioning the legitimacy of the program that differs totally from the conventional methodology.

Conclusion

The famous quotation by Benjamin Franklin states, “*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.*” As similar to the quoted message, it is the felt need of all the teachers to bring in a new path for learning a language by involving the student in a performance. It creates not only fun and happiness, but also a huge amount of language production. Therefore it is recommended that a whole lot of activities like role-plays as part of task based learning must be

incorporated in our regular classrooms that give us a great experience with an output of all the four skills.

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