A Task-Based Approach to Language Learning: Real-play versus role-play

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INTRODUCTION

One of the goals in a task-based approach in language learning programmes for tertiary students is to achieve communicative competence in the kind of tasks they will encounter in the real world of work. A widely-used and recommended communicative approach where learners can gain experience of certain aspects of the real world is through various kinds of interactive activities known as role-play. Unfortunately, role-play has often been misconceived as language-practice activities rather than as language-using activities. Ladousse (1987) for example, sees the language work in role play where students 'practise structures and functions that have been presented to them at an earlier stage of the lesson in a free and uncontrolled way. Crookall (1984) noted that though the main use of role play in the EFL classroom was to recreate situations in which students were encouraged to use language spontaneously, the language points determine the role-play activity, thereby making the learning situation unnecessarily artificial. He argues that since the main aim of role-play is to attempt to represent part of the real world, role-play activities must offer socially realistic and credible language-generating activities. Thus in designing role play activities 'we should not be concerned at all with language but with the socially constructed situation and its meaning'.

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WHAT CONSTITUTES REAL-PLAY

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The Assumption of Role

Ments (1983) defines the concept of role in a role-play as a way of expressing group norms and the social pressures acting on an individual or group. Thus when a student is asked to assume a role in role-play, he is practising a set of behaviours which is considered appropriate to that particular role. Unfortunately, in language teaching role-play exercises, there is a confusion between role-playing and acting. For example, students are often required to take on a role that is completely alien to him. One argument for doing this is that playing a role different from oneself can lead to a better understanding of other people's attitudes and points of view. However, if the objectives as in a Communication Skills course are that of credibility, authenticity, language use and acquisition, it may be counter-productive in that if the students have to project themselves by minimizing their own personality, then authenticity suffers.

In role-play, the player may take on the role of an imaginary person, a real person or himself. But in real-play, the student is asked to play himself and not imitate the actions of another student of another sex, age, racial group. He will not be asked to play in a role which he does not normally occupy, e.g. a manager, policeman etc.

Situation

In a role-play, the situation is defined by producing a scenario and a set of role descriptions. The scenario gives a background to the particular problem or environment and indicates the constraints which operate. In real-play, the situation actually imposes on the role-player the same type of constraints, motivations and pressures that exist in the real world. Mature learners want to see the relevance of what they are doing, and real play can be tied up with real problems which they can recognise and identify with. Unlike in role-play where the player often has to assume the problem is his, in real-play the player has to cope not only with the problems per se but with his own problems and how that affects other people's behaviour.

Outcomes

Thirdly, in role-play there are no real consequences in the sense that the player's own behaviour is not at issue but rather the behaviour of the student-in-role. In real-play the player takes decisions and observes what aspects of his behaviour are rewarding or unrewarding. Furthermore, real issues like who has the power to influence others and who is affected by the decisions taken will surface. The player's observation of the consequence of his actions and behaviour will influence his future actions.

TWO ILLUSTRATIONS OF REAL-PLAY

I shall now describe two instances of real-play used to teach communications skills for civil engineering undergraduates. But first, let me explain the nature and aims of the Communication Skills course (CS) designed for the our second year engineering undergraduates at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).
The Communication Skills course at NTU

Our university administration decided that Communication Skills and not ESP be incorporated into the Engineering curriculum where the CS course focuses more on the usual targets of greater efficiency in written and oral communication than on mere linguistic proficiency. This is because when our students enter the workforce, they are expected to function immediately as professional engineers in the workplace. Thus the Communication Skills course is designed to develop the students’ ability to:

* communicate technical information effectively in the academic setting in several modes: written, oral, audio-visual and graphic.

* adapt material prepared in one form for presentation in another, e.g. adapt a written report for an oral presentation.

* communicate effectively with a technical and non-technical audience in job-related tasks like writing of memos and minutes, controlling and contributing to meetings and interviews, etc.

To achieve the above objectives the skills are taught in modules. In each module the teaching strategy is Presentation, Production and Feedback. The presentation is given in the form of lectures because of the class size of 200 students. The practice and feedback are done through tutorials which are devoted entirely to task-oriented activities. Some of these activities involve case studies and role-play. Where feasible, real-play is substituted for role-play as in the case of the job-application module.

Job interviews

In this module, for the real-play activity, we invited recruiters from various companies to conduct the job selection interviews with some of our students.

The activity involves students writing application letters and resumes for a position they are likely to occupy when they graduate, e.g. a site engineer in a construction company. Based on mine and their peers’ evaluation of the covering letters and resumes, a few students are shortlisted for the job interviews. Their covering letters and resumes are then given to the recruiters a few days before the actual interview. On the day of the interview, the shortlisted students come dressed for the occasion. The interviewers are recruiters from various construction companies (usually small to medium-sized companies) who view these students as potential employees as they have an interest in employing them as civil engineers.

This activity fulfills the criteria set out for real-play. Firstly, the student is asked to play himself and in a role he will no doubt be performing when he looks for a job. Secondly, the interviewing situation actually imposes similar types of constraints and pressures that exist in the real world, for example, the interviewers’ biases, prejudices, their companies’ recruitment policies, culture etc. Real issues and problems emanate in this form of real-play. In the usual role-play of job-interviews, for example, the instructor directs the student interviewer to follow a sequence commonly found in text-books: put
the interviewee at ease, explore his reasons for applying for the job, tell him something about the job etc. In real-play, we see this happening only some of the time. Instead we saw in our real-play sessions how some of the interviewers did quite the opposite in order to see how well the interviewees respond to stressful situations.

Though there were no real consequences in this situation, the outcome (which was the feedback given by the recruiters) of the players performance was real enough. In the feedback session the recruiters explained why they view certain responses of interviewees favourably or unfavourably. The students realized there was definitely no real consensus among the recruiters on what the essential ingredients are for success at job interviews. They saw the range of styles, perceptions, and requirements of recruiters. An interesting outcome of this real-play was the opportunity for the students to discuss with the recruiters the suitability, validity and relevance of the questions fielded to the interviewees. Another interesting outcome was the opportunity to question the recruiters’ techniques and to feed back to the recruiters how they felt with some of the questions asked of them. Thus the outcome of this real-play is that the observations and feedback given of the actions and behaviour of both interviewers and interviewees will definitely influence the students’ future interviewing actions.

In one instance this form of real-play became real life when a recruiter was so impressed with one student’s performance that he was actually promised a job upon his graduation. One unrealistic element in this real-play is that the interviewing process was watched by other students.

A civil-engineering building project

Another example of real-play involves the integration of the Communication Skills course into the in-house practical training module of the engineering curriculum. This practical training programme simulates and condenses the major part of a real-life civil engineering construction project to ten weeks. Its aim is to simulate as closely as possible real construction practice. Thus the programme provides authentic involvement in the execution of a construction project which requires students to build a life-sized structure. Examples of such structures built in the past years included a spectators’ gallery, a games-arena and shell roofs to house an experiment station.

From the point of view of the Communication Skills course, this 10-week training is a culmination of the year’s work in communication skills. The students have to perform a variety of communication tasks, both oral and written, for the successful completion of this engineering project. Here again we see the real-play elements present in terms of the role, the situation and the outcome.

Last year, for example, the 220 sophomore students were organised into construction ‘teams’ to build a life-sized trench 40 metres long to be used as a testing apparatus for use in one of their laboratories. The students were required to run their teams as companies. This meant students had to assume the whole spectrum of professional personnel ranging from site workers, foremen, site engineer to project manager. Their tasks ranged from the digging of the foundations, the bending and placing of reinforcement to the handing over of the completed structure. They had to learn
management techniques, budgetary control, ordering of materials, handling and
organising workers, the technical skills of construction as well communication skills in
the form of writing memos, letters, minutes, diaries, progress reports, conducting site
meetings and making boardroom presentations to tender for projects before a panelist
comprising industrialists and academia.

In this real-play situation, the team the students belonged to were referred to as
companies. Each company adopted a company name which was used in all subsequent
correspondence with other companies. The companies were allowed to design and print
memo and letter headings incorporating the company logo which they used for
correspondence and communication with the academic staff and between other teams. The
roles assumed by the students are not imaginary in the sense that they have to execute the
duties and responsibilities attached to the particular roles. For example, if they are site
workers, they have to obey instructions from their superiors who are their fellow
students. Real problems and issues surface when students find difficulty either in giving
instructions to their 'subordinates' or accepting orders from their 'superiors'. Mistakes
made during the construction of the structure either due to poor management,
miscommunication or technical skill had to be remedied. Thus in terms of outcomes,
there are real consequences in that the players' actions, decisions, behaviours, and
attitudes will be rewarded accordingly.

The real-play in this construction activity is an ideal situation for the
Communication Skills course. It brings to a climax the preceding year's work in building
up all the necessary skills required in the execution of an activity integral to the students'
professional training.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the use of real-play has the advantage over role-play in its ability not
only to reflect features of the real world outside but more importantly in enabling the
students to perceive the simulated situation as realistic and credible.

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