

THE EFFECT OF USING ROLE-PLAY ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING ABILITY

Ramin Rahimy, Samaneh Safarpour

Department of English Language,
Islamic Azad University,
IRAN.

Rahimy49@yahoo.com,

sepideh.safarpour@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of role-play as a classroom activity on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. This study tried to determine whether or not using role-play activities in speaking classrooms might enhance a more acceptable speaking ability in Iranian EFL learners at the intermediate level. To answer this question, 60 intermediate language learners in Shokouh Language Institute in Bandar Anzali were randomly selected via administering an OPT to 100 language learners. Then, they were divided into experimental and control groups. A pre-test of speaking including 10 questions was administered to both groups, and the participants were asked to answer them orally. The experimental group was taught speaking in lieu of the targeted role-play activity while the control group was taught speaking with respect the existing methods. After five sessions of the treatments, the post-test of speaking was administered in which the participants in both groups were asked to answer the posttest questions. The data was analyzed through calculating a t-test and ANCOVA coefficient. The results indicated that the means of the two groups were significantly different.

Keywords: EFL learners, OPT, role play, speaking ability, teaching speaking

INTRODUCTION

In the applied linguistics literature, although the word “proficient” is often used interchangeably with words such as “good”, “fluent”, “knowledgeable”, “bilingual”, “component”, and so on, it is not always clear what speaking proficiency entails; the term may be quite different from researcher to researcher (Galloway, 1987; McNamara, 1996). According to Chaney (1998), speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in variety of contexts. Speaking is important in language learning and teaching. For many years, students repeated the drills and memorized the dialogs but today, they should learn how to express themselves. They should learn to follow social and cultural rules in any situation. They learn to speak in different communicative circumstances.

Observations and experiences have shown that many Iranian EFL learners seemed to worry about how they can pass different courses like listening and speaking ones in the institute. However, they failed to speak in real situations of language use. This claim was supported by a pilot study done on a group of Iranian junior EFL learners in which their speaking ability was tested and traces of failure were proved to exist. Some of the problems in speaking ability include: a.) they do not have enough motivation to practice in the class (Asaei, 2011); b.) they are too shy and afraid to take part in the conversation; c.) they have nothing to say; and d.) they do not like the materials

The nature of the stated problem urges Iranian English teachers to utilize various methods with the purpose of facilitating learning the speaking skill in the classroom, but such methodologies most often lead to failure. Among the techniques used to improve the speaking ability, perhaps, the position of “role-play” seems to be ignored which has been the focus of this study.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Arends (1998) stressed on the practice of interacting with others as a way of making teachers' teaching style lively. It can prevent teaching from being stale and routine. When trying new techniques, they are not necessarily entertaining new principles. Most of them shared a common theme of emphasizing verbal tasks that focused on meaning rather than language structure (Breen, 1984).

Van Ments (1983) provided some support and explanation on the benefits that accumulate from using role play activities by stating that perceptions are formed when ones brain codes and groups information. Comparisons and decisions can be made as people examine the way others behave in different situations. He further stated that roles act as shorthand ways of recognizing, identifying, and labeling a set of appearances and behaviors. People form assumptions based on appearance, behavior, and characteristic of a particular person. They predict what they will do in a given situation. Ladousse (1987) noted that that may be allocated by social position in everyday life, such as a police, clerk, engineer, teacher, president or juvenile delinquent. A role is a way of explaining or expression group norms and society's ability to handle an individual or a group (Van Ments, 1983).

Holt and Kysilka (2006) asserted that context or the surrounding where you will be placed can influence your role behavior. When you see yourself or other role-players as members of congregation, an audience or participants in a parade, then the way you behave-your-changes in accordance with your surrounding (Holt & Kysilka, 2006 p. 192). For example, the way that you used to behave with your friend is different from the way that you behave in formal situations. They acknowledged that roles can also be influenced by a person's function or purpose. For example, people in the hotel industry may be carrying out the tasks of a manager, front desk staff, bell person, or representative. People who work in an airport will be carrying out the tasks of travel agent, flight attendant, captain or passenger. Since roles are dependent on context,

function, and purpose, the instructor needs to carefully think through the enactment when he or she would like to employ role play activity in the classroom. The instructor will have to consider the students engagement, role assessing, duration of the activity, and debriefing of the enactment (Holt & Kysilka, 2006).

Van Ments (1983) stated that there are several interchangeable terms associated with the role play teaching method, and different opinions comparing and contrasting role play with instructional methods. The interchangeable terms he sites include simulation, game, simulation game, and role play game with no agreement on which term is preferred. Ladousse (1987) viewed simulation as complex, lengthy, inflexible. On the other hand, role play activity is simple, belief, and flexible.

Ones (1982) affirmed that players have to take the responsibilities of their roles and maximize their outcome as much as they can in the situation in which they find themselves in order for a simulation to occur. Role play can engage an entire class, it can be fun, and it may result in better learning of language (Holt & Kysilka, 2006).

Cornett (1999) highlighted that students develop fluency in language and verbal communication skills, as well as the use of the body in face-to-face communication, when they are involved in role play activities. Those skills are especially essential for students learning a second language who may not often speak English at home. These EFL learners are stimulated to employ the language and then improve fluency and pronunciation with the chance to participate in role plays (Burke & O'Sullivan, 2002). Role-players are simply required to act out the other roles as they think how other roles may behave. Consequently, role players will have clear understanding of reactions, feelings, values, and attitudes of the person in the same (Holt & Kysilka, 2006).

Holt and Kysilka (2006) stated that role play activities can be fun and lead to better learning. Because these activities use a student-student interactional pattern, they help EFL learners to understand the importance of cooperation and to have an interest in learning.

Mitchell (1977) noted that group processing depends on four elements: interaction, observation, reflection, and plan. Interaction is the peer-relation; observation is the feedback given by peers; reflection is the thoughts provided by group members; and the plan is the procedure to achieve the shared outcome. Once students appropriately carry out those elements, their oral abilities will by working together. Teachers try to create a classroom environment where students have authentic activities and real-life communication that promote speaking. So, the students should collaborate in groups to achieve these goals. There are many activities to promote speaking. There are some activities to promote speaking. One of them is role-play. In role-play activities students pretend they are in varies social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student, "You are David; you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night "(Harmer, 1984).

Group work increases the amount of time available for oral practice and allows more than one students to benefit from speaking time. Working on groups also lowers the inhibitions of shy students who are not comfortable speaking in front of the whole class. Role-play can engage an entire class, and it can be fun and lead the whole team to more effective learning (Holt & Kysilka, 2006).

Thornbury (2006) averred that conversation is an informal talk between one or more people, most learners identify the ability to participate in conversations as a desirable language-learning goal. A fact that many language learners feel that their most urgent need is to develop conversational competence, and they regularly choose “conversational” as their principle objective when answering needs analysis survey (Thornbury, 2006).

Huebner (1960) said “language is essentially speech, and speech is basically communication by sounds.” According to him, speaking is a skill used by someone in daily life communication whether at school or outside. The skill is required by much repetition; it is primarily considered a neuromuscular and not an intellectual process. It consists of competence in sending and receiving messages. Thus, speaking is a mean for expressing ideas, opinions, or feelings to others.

Gardner (1999) emphasized that interaction is a jointly co-constructed activity that speakers and listeners build their utterances upon the influence of their recipients. Brown and Yule (1983) also draw a useful distinction between two basic language functions. The first is the transactional function, which is considered the transfer of the information. Another is the interactional function, which is that the primary goal of interaction is the maintenance of social relationships. The functions of spoken language are interactional and transactional. The primary intention of the former is to maintain social relationships, whereas that of the latter is to convey information and ideas. In fact, much of our daily communication remains interactional. Being able to interact in a language is essential. Therefore, language instructors should provide learners with opportunities for meaningful communicative behavior about relevant topics by using learner-learner interaction as the key to teaching language for communication because “communication derives essentially from interaction” (Rivers, 1987, p. xiii).

McInnis (1998) studied *about caring communication in the language classroom* which stated that the challenge for the next century is to begin using language to inspire, conciliation rather than conflict, and peace rather than war.

Dell Hymes (1974) proposed the notion of communicative competence as an alternative to Chomsky’s linguistic competence. Communicative competence includes linguistic competence, but also includes a range of other sociolinguistic and conversational skills that enable the speaker to know how to say what to whom, when.

In the early 1970s, Savignon conducted an important study in to the development of communication skills built on a model of communicative competence containing several essential characteristics. She defined communicative competence as ‘the ability to function in a

truly communicative setting- that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adjust itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors' (Savignon, 2003, p. 9).

Richards and Rodgers (1986) examined three theoretical views of language: structure, functional and interactional. The role-playing/simulation method follows from interactional view. This view sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individual. Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of learners as interactions."(Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.17)

In addition to being dynamic rather than static and involving the negotiation of meaning, for Savignon (1972), communicative competence is not restricted to spoken language, but also involves writing. It is also context-specific which means that a competent communicator knows how to make choices specific to the situation. It is distinct from performance. According to him, competence is what one knows while performance is what one does (Savignon, 1972, 1983).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the problem stated as well as the literature reviewed in the previous section, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using role-play as a classroom activity on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. The main purpose of the study is to answer the following question:

1. Does the application of role play in teaching speaking lead to more acceptable speaking ability in Iranian EFL learners?

HYPOTHESIS

H₀: Applying role play in teaching speaking does not lead to more acceptable speaking ability in Iranian EFL learners.

METHODS

Participants

The subjects of the study were 60 Iranian EFL learners in Shokouh's English Institute. They were selected based on the administration of an OPT exam to 100 intermediate EFL learners. Selected students received scores at least one standard deviation below the mean in the OPT. They were divided in two groups of 30 and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The materials of the study were of four sorts; 1) material for the proficiency test; 2) material for the pretest of the study; 3) material for the treatment of the study; and 4) material for the posttest of the study. The material for the proficiency test comprised 30 questions of the OPT including grammar, vocabulary and sentence completion. The material for the pretest of speaking of the study consisted of 10 questions to be answered by the participants in both groups orally. The material for the study's treatment consisted of teaching speaking with the participants' ordinary teaching materials in speaking but with the role-play tasks such as "acting out", "group work", etc. for the experimental group and without the mentioned tasks (using the existing methods of teaching speaking) for the control group. Finally, the material for the posttest of the study consisted of the same 10 questions in the pretest of speaking to be answered by the participants in both groups. The participants' performance in the pretest and the posttest of speaking were scored on the basis of five criteria: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Such a criterion was adopted from Farhadi, Jafarpour and Birjandi's (2000) rating scale.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data of current study were analyzed via applying the following statistical methods: a t-value (t-test) was calculated between the posttest scores of speaking in the two participant groups to show the effect in the first hypothesis of the study. Two separate ANCOVAs were calculated between the scores of pretest and posttest of the experimental group as well as the pretest and the posttest of the control group.

RESULTS

Table 1. The summary of descriptive analysis for the data related to the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study

Groups	N	Mean	S.D.
Speaking + Role Play	30	23.63	1.34
Speaking -Role Play	30	21.03	1.62

As table (1) indicates, the mean of the +role-play group (the experimental group) is higher than that of the -role-play group (the control group). Accordingly, the number of participants in each group was 30 ($N_{+RP}=30$; $N_{-RP}=30$); in addition, the amount of the standard deviation was lower in the experimental group as compared to the control group of the study which indicates that the experimental group posttest scores are more homogenous than those of the control group.

Inferential Analysis of the Data

Table 2. The summary of t-test between the posttest scores of experimental and the control group of the study

Variance	t	Mean Difference
Equal variances		
not assumed	4.65	2.60

According to table (2), the result of t-test ($t_{obs} = 4.65$, $p < .05$) yielded significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The obtained t-observed is higher than the critical value of t in the t-student table with the degree of freedom of 56 ($df = 56$) and the level of significance of 0.05 (Sig. = 0.05) for the two-tailed (null) hypothesis as to be 2.000 ($t_{crit} = 2.000$). Such a result ($t_{obs} > t_{crit}$) rejects the null hypothesis of the current study.

Table (3) below represents the results of two ANCOVA coefficients calculated separately between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study:

Table 3. The covariance matrix between the pretest and the posttest scores of the experimental and the control group of the study

Group	Covariance
Experimental	1.13
Control	2.06

Table (3) indicates that the coefficient of ANCOVA for the experimental group is lower than that of the control group. This means that the pretest and the posttest scores in the control group are closer to each other as compared to those in the experimental group, which represents that treating the experimental group with role-play activities has resulted in increasing the range of their speaking scores in the posttest.

DISCUSSIONS

The results in tables (2) and (3) indicated that the null hypothesis of the study was rejected. This rejection means that the utilized treatment of the study affected the outcome; thus, it can be concluded that using role-play tasks as classroom activities enhance performance in a test of speaking among Iranian EFL learners.

Based on the obtained results, certain justifications regarding the effectiveness of using role-play tasks on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability can be made. Accordingly, the subjects under experimental group seemed to succeed because of getting involved in role-play activities such as group work. It can be inferred that if the class is framed as a community to work together

supporting each other, it will have the opportunity to work for the same aims. This builds their ability to communicate with and understand each other, the best basis for all learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of the present study enunciated that role- playing seems to provide a sort of enjoyable environment for the learners to flourish in. This reason leads to better attention in learning and stimulate them to participate in role-play activities. In role-play activities, students take a new identity and learn to use a foreign language for every day communication.

As a future perspective regarding the present study, researchers are advised to expand the scope of this research study from 3 limited participant intermediate classes to more classes with different levels of language proficiency. Additionally, the experiment can be replicated to different geographical areas, institutes and linguistic situations; English is not the only language to which the experimentation of this study is implementable. It can be repeated across genders (male and female) in terms of student participants and teacher participants. Also, the sample size in this research study ($n = 60$) may be converted into a larger size of Iranian (non-Iranian) EFL participants to find out whether or not the results can be the same. Finally, it will be helpful if the teacher, while performing the role-play tasks in teaching speaking, talks about a variety of topics including human characteristics such as embarrassment, happiness, sadness, or dishonestly and describes occasions when these characteristics might come in to play.

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