

ROLE PLAY: A PANACEA IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS

Naginder Kaur
UiTM, Arau Campus

ABSTRACT

Although group work is highly recommended in the *KBSM*, role play has somewhat lost its role in the language class due to lack of resourcefulness and innovation on the part of some teachers. By employing this profitable pedagogical device, the benefits to be accrued are aplenty. It is a platform to implicitly infuse and reinforce the moral values relevant to Malaysian settings and culture. In line with the increasing prominence given to learner-centred teaching, role play also serves as a springboard to sculpture self-directed, empowered and autonomous learners. The real world is brought into the classroom in an experiential learning process and this in turn improves communicative competence. Regular use can also enhance self-concept and reinforce learning style preferences of relational learners. Role play ought to be more widely used through efforts at all levels. Teacher preparation programmes should play their part in raising the consciousness of pre-service teachers. The classroom culture and ethos must be revamped to provide avenues to hear the learners' 'voices'. Workshops and motivation programmes can be conducted for students to build confidence and develop conflict resolution skills, so that they can attain maturity in coping with complex decision-making processes through the enactment of roles in a multitude of situations.

Introduction

Role play has been in existence, long before we even gave it a name. Shakespeare affirmed that "...one man in his time plays many parts..." Wordsworth too talked of the child as 'The Little Actor' who "fits his tongue to dialogues of business, love or strife..." In our daily social encounters, we put on varied roles to fit the contexts / milieu. In the language class, role play is an imaginative enactment, where learners assume a part (either their own or somebody else's) when they take on a role, either prepared or impromptu. In defining role play, Ladousse (1987) draws an analogy of the seven blind men trying to describe an elephant. To some (Bambrough, 1994, Van Ments, 1990), it falls under the wide umbrella set of simulation and gaming while others, like Jones (1988) oppose the notion because it is short and episodic. These myriad activities range from highly-controlled guided conversations to improvised drama activities. Role play is an educational technique, known to generate a lot of fun, excitement, joy and laughter in the language class as 'play' itself connotes a safe environment in which learners areas inventive and playful as possible (Ladousse, 1987).

The Role of Role Play in the Curriculum

The revised English Syllabus and Curriculum Specifications (2000) of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (*KBSM*) stress language use in three areas: Interpersonal, Informational, and the Aesthetic. Specified topics based on selected settings / themes for the secondary school form the backdrop to reinforce a learning unit. In order to enable learners to acquire the necessary proficiency to carry out their daily interactive activities, as outlined in the syllabus, learners need to be engaged in a variety of speaking / oral interactive activities, requiring production of language. As group work is highly recommended in the *KBSM*, role play fits firmly into the aims of the syllabus:

The syllabus aims to extend learners' English Language proficiency in order to meet their need to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs (p.2).

It is also stipulated that the objectives of the syllabus, among other things is to “form and maintain relationships through conversations and correspondence; take part in social interaction; and interact to obtain goods and services”. With the implementation of the *KBSM* surpassing a decade, the full potential of role play seems yet unexplored. In spite of its centrality in communicative language teaching and learning, role play has somewhat lost its role and declined in prominence. Many recommended textbooks do not adequately tap this useful resource, leaving teachers to source for further activities on their own. Several indices denote its passing over the last decade - fewer articles have appeared on role play in recent years, no books have been printed lately to promote it and the number of activities on role play is seen to have declined in recent foreign language classroom series (Ali Yahya Al-Arishi, 1994). Why is role play downplayed in our language class? Sadly, group work and the *KBSM* in general have not fully been understood. The failure of the *KBSM* is not in its objectives but in its practice. Lack of sound understanding of the philosophy that underlies the *KBSM* and lack of exposure of the teachers have also resulted in disinterestedness to explore and stretch the full potential of the curriculum. Thus, role play needs to be widely mooted, as the benefits are aplenty.

Infusion of Moral Values

How can we effectively infuse values relevant to Malaysian culture and norms? The answer—role play. Whilst the focus in the 1970s was on academic development, the curriculum reform of the *KBSR* and *KBSM* aspires to a holistic development of the

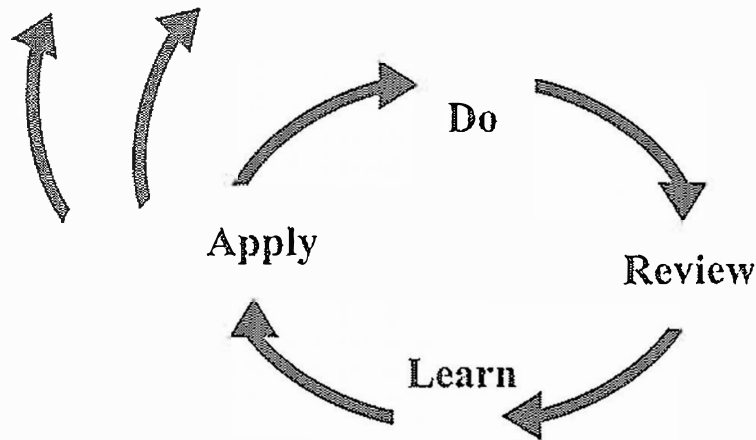
individual, as manifested in the National Education Philosophy. As the curriculum mirrors the dominant ideology of a country (Haris Md. Jadi, 1991), in Malaysia, it rests on the premise of national integration and holistic development of the individual, in and beyond the years of formal education. The curriculum espouses the philosophy of educating learners in the larger context of life, so that they would grow up to be knowledgeable citizens, with high moral standards, able to contribute to the betterment of society and the nation. Language skills, language content and moral values are to be nurtured integratively, hence the notion of an integrated curriculum. In the revised syllabus of 2000, to “show an awareness and appreciation of moral values and love towards the nation” is an integral component of the curriculum. Role play is **the panacea** to impart these values. Situations involving various experiences drawn from everyday happenings in familiar settings such as the home, school, the library, supermarket, bus station, the park and *pasar malam* can integratively reinforce the intended values.

Autonomy through a Learner-Centred Approach

Educators are now on the move to promote self-regulated learning, which creates learner autonomy and role play is one such platform (Bambrough, 1994), though often rejected as a fad of the communicative syllabi era. Dwelling on a student-centred learning approach, it produces self-directed learners, capable of constructing and regulating their own learning cycle in and beyond the classroom. The very essence of education is to make learners self-reliant, able to carry on the process independently because they have learnt how to use available resources by themselves (Van Ments, 1990, 1989). A Chinese proverb describes autonomy and self-reliance as: “*Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.*” By keeping a learning journal and following procedures for task completion, learners take charge through self-awareness, self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-monitoring during and after the process. Empowerment is manifested as learners experience decision-making for themselves (via role enactments) and take note of their successes and failures. Such learning becomes the source of creativity, confidence, flexibility, awareness, rationality and maturity of emotion as it provides opportunities to handle unprecedented situations.

Experiential Process of Language Learning

Kirk's (1987) Cycle of Experiential Learning demonstrates a process involving active learning as opposed to passive teaching. Learning is by doing things in a group, self-review, drawing conclusions and applying these to their real-life experiences elsewhere through the overlapping /simultaneous / developmental four-step cycle.



Role play, being an activity of experiential learning (Joyce, *et. al.*, 1992, Van Ments, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Wolsk, 1975) brings the real world into the classroom, transforming the artificial and sterile atmosphere. The encounter and experience with reality and real-life situations provide insights into persistent problems, besides building upon language proficiency through naturalistic interaction. The focus is on the **process** of playing a part rather than content or knowledge of grammatical structures. It is skills-based, not knowledge-based, drawing from all surrounding phenomena in its open-ended and cross-curriculum nature. Since learning is more to do with questions than with answers, it is only through direct experience that understanding and change comes about. As Van Ments (1990) contends:

Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you. (p. 59)

Students can discover the ‘*how*’ of learning is as important as the ‘*what*.’ The mere observation of the phenomenon is inadequate as follow-ups such as testing the dynamics of the reality are equally important, as suggested by Sharan and Sharan (1976):

... role playing can be used effectively to improve skills needed for the language process (i.e. how students work together) rather than simply being a technique for exploring content. (p.182)

Increased Communicative Competence

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the communicative wave has swept across the language teaching world. There has been growing emphasis on communication, in which tasks focus on meaning more than form. Learning for communicative

competence— the ability to use language appropriately has gained prominence (e.g. the KBSM) instead of linguistic competence of knowing grammatical rules. Language proficiency includes not only knowledge of phonology, syntax, vocabulary and semantics but the ability to make use of this knowledge appropriately in actual communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). In the intimate relationship between communicative competence and oral activities of role play, language is the invariable by-product, covertly acquired and implicitly facilitated. Both proficient and less proficient learners are engaged in negotiating meaning through verification, explanation and clarification to achieve the common group goal. They strive to comprehend and be comprehended by applying the relevant language functions in natural, real-life language befitting the speech community. Through communication, learners generate the appropriate language variety and contextual style, pertinent to the context, including conversational ellipses, dialects, slang, colloquialism or even code-switching and code-mixing (if need be). Interactive active communication is enhanced in simultaneous student talk of language production and language comprehension. This is especially useful for LEP (low English proficiency) learners since an increased quantity of communication is available for intake. Successful completion of communicative tasks does not necessarily require an accurate use of the structures which emerge naturally as some require only rudimentary linguistic knowledge, but the intrinsic combination of verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic features (e.g. gestures, facial expressions) convey the intended meaning and higher quality discourse. By giving new information, repetitions or expansions, linguistic complexity is achieved. Successful enactments can also dismiss contentions (if any) of the artificiality of the discourse generated. However, when deemed necessary, explicit forms and functions for various tasks may be incorporated to balance components and discourse processes, overcoming possible perceptions of the *laissez-faire* nature of role play.

Enhancement in Self-Concept

There is a strong and positive cause and effect relationship between self-concept and students' participation in role play (Naginder Kaur, 1999). Self-concept, a multi-faceted psychological construct in general terms, represents perceptions of oneself as derived for self-attributions, interaction with significant others and other experiential aspects of the social environment (Shavelson *et al.*, 1976). Various dimensions such as the Academic Self-Concept, the Social Self-Concept, the Emotional Self-Concept and the Physical Self-Concept, each with further sub-components, supersede in different contexts. The interplay and overlapping of the facets underpin the general self-concept. In role play, it bears a relationship with motivation and level of

participation as the affective domain grows alongside the acquisition of knowledge. Learners develop a positive self-concept through participation. Conversely, as Thatcher (1990) states:

Poor self-image is a powerful block to learning and a very powerful block to clear communication, and it is also a very persistent block which is difficult to remove once it has developed. (p. 299)

Constant and continued opportunities in role play can lead to improvement, particularly in the facets of Academic Self-Concept, Emotional Self-Concept and Social Self-Concept in both weak and proficient learners (Naginder Kaur, 1999). The personal growth leads to heightened self-awareness and confidence, owing to supportive peers and teacher.

Reinforcement of Preferred Learning Styles

Generally, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are a kinesthetic and tactile learning type (Reid, 1987). The Malay learners, being the kinesthetic type, demonstrate a high preference for group learning. This could be attributed to their culture, which emphasises kinship and collaborative work, such as *gotong-royong*. In role plays, learners used to collaborative learning can tap on such kinesthetic learning to reinforce their preferred learning styles.

Teacher as the Facilitator

Pedagogical adjustments by the teacher is necessary—playing an implicit, non-interfering role as a facilitator rather than knowledge transmitter. Grounded in mutual respect between the teacher and learners, role play is a low-input high-output process. A short teacher presentation stage suffices in providing scaffolds to self-directed learning. Coopersmith & Feldman's (1974) suggestions of fostering a positive perception, indicating realistic avenues for success and investing the learners with responsibility for their own development are determined by the teacher, who sets the classroom tempo and climate. Situations ought to be well-organised and purposeful; tasks be carefully explained, with examples, before learners engage themselves. Teacher modelling transmits confidence and learners know what is expected of them and how they are supposed to go about accomplishing the task.

However, since role play is vulnerable to participant resistance due to dangers of anxiety, fear and guilt (Jones, 1988), it is imperative the teacher creates a non-threatening and relaxed ambience so that the shy ones can be drawn out of their

' cocoons '. Teacher-fronted practice and persistent demand for class performances (against learners' will) would only evoke fear, intimidation, anxiety and non-contribution, rooted in lack of confidence and poor self-concept. Learners will **not** experience joy nor language improvement without the encouragement, positive reinforcement, and warmth exhibited by the teacher. To battle trepidations, stress ought to be on the process of communication (not acting ability). Teacher discretion can determine whether texts / dialogues should be written or otherwise. Weak learners can be allowed to write out their contributions in the initial sessions or be provided with a word-list relevant to the context. This structural approach can provide the crutch of confidence and reduce self-consciousness, whilst progressively encouraging spontaneity. Teacher intervention may be necessary when dealing with challenging tasks and reticence. Adequate time ought to be given, depending on the range of proficiency and ability. Situations may also be take-home or holiday assignments, to be accomplished within a stipulated time. In the process, the teacher can understand the learners' self-perceptions and know the reason(s) for their behaviour. Attempts can be made to improve the lacking or deficient issues in behaviour, through counselling and motivation. By viewing the holistic picture, rash misconceptions are avoidable. Besides, role play gauges learners' participation, hence the value of the experience and the extent of behavioural changes (i.e. pedagogical objectives) can be probed. As iterated by Dennison and Kirk (1990): "Poor self-image is a powerful block to learning and a very powerful block to clear communication, and it is also a very persistent block which is difficult to remove once it has developed". (p. 299)

The Role of Peers

Role play can be seen to rest on the framework of cooperative learning which has five key elements i.e. positive interdependence, team formation, accountability, social skills and structuring and structures. The mechanics of group work can be explored through the cooperation developed as collaborative work entails awareness of relationships. Responsibility for the group grows and participants learn to evaluate the performance of the group as well as of themselves. In group tasks, the role of peers, who are the significant others is instrumental in boosting the Social Self-Concept through acceptance, lending of confidence and cooperation. Hurt *et al.* (1978) adduce that affinity is often the desired outcome of communication between people, as there is an inner need among learners to foster warm relationships. This favourable atmosphere in turn enhances participation-willingness to participate, optimising potential and striving to play the role assigned appropriately, since fear and consciousness of limited language proficiency and mistakes are allayed. Positive reactions during multilateral interactions emerge as a result of the renewed confidence and support received. A non-threatening atmosphere of group / pair work would alleviate anxiety which may be otherwise experienced (Di Pietro, 1987). Non-vocal

and submissive learners benefit too as their learning style, upbringing and socio-cultural values (of conformity and emphasising harmony) could be the contributors to their apparent silence. Sometimes, familiarity among group members may be an (initial) problem, which can be overcome through efforts of adaptability to diverse personality types. As familiarity evokes a sense of belonging and ownership with the group, it yields positive responses. Lack of cooperation (if any) could indeed be a catalyst to some, who may consciously strive harder to cope. Innate personality is equally important in establishing adaptability to peers and the environment as learners who are more optimistic are inherently more active and vice versa.

How to Promote the Use of Role Play

Teacher Preparation Programmes

Teacher preparation programmes can play a key role in ensuring the ultimate accomplishment of the National Educational Philosophy and the *KBSM*. Firstly, student teachers should internalise the underlying philosophy of the *KBSM* and the education ideology. It is felt that some teachers perform in the classroom without adequate understanding of the 'what' and 'why'. Since the nurturing of the teacher begins at this level, prospective teachers can be taught the different ways group work can be explored, despite the looming constraints. Teachers should be drilled not to resign to their fate but to seek innovation by making the best of the learning situations at hand. Teachers may also not be using role play because they simply do not know how to tap into it meaningfully or realise the benefits. Student teachers should be taught **how** to utilise role play purposefully and effectively. Many a time, teachers assign the situations and expect the learners to perform, assuming that they know just what to do. Training and ingraining must include subscribing to the principles of learning so that role play is not a mere ad-hoc filler but meets specific pedagogical goals.

Classroom Culture

There is also a dire need to reform our classroom culture if we are seeking autonomous learners, capable of taking control of their own learning. As stated earlier, group work needs to be more widely used so that learners can break free of the humdrum of the widely-used lecture-format. The rote learning skills imparted by the curriculum and the hidden curriculum are deeply rooted as learners need to fulfill the expectations of our fundamentally, meritocratic society. Learners are frequently measured by their cognitive ability (i.e. performance in examinations) while other aspects of development such as the psychomotor and affective states are often trivialised. As a result, they are not adequately exposed to experiential communicative activities and this spillover effect of reticence and passiveness can be witnessed at the post-

secondary level where learners incessantly recline on writing dialogues as a crutch.

To revamp the classroom ethos, learners must be given more opportunities to verbalise their thoughts freely. Empowerment to be in-charge of their own learning must begin at initial schooling, i.e. by identifying their learning preferences and tapping into the relevant resources to promote learning. This means, perceiving learners not as a featureless mass but as resource and whole beings, whose 'voices' are to be heard. Teachers, being at the grassroots should make that change in the classrooms as pointed out by Tedick and Walker (1994): "It is the responsibility of individuals working as a collective network to confront their beliefs and to be willing to embrace the challenges and begin to work toward substantive, lasting change". (p.309)

Learners in the West are vocal and assertive due to the learning atmosphere and culture which encourage expressions of thoughts. Teachers should be more accommodating to accept challenges from learners. Such reformation would slowly encourage them to participate more readily with high self-esteem. An important consideration when working with role play is that learners (especially LEP and non-assertive ones) be allowed to pick their own partners and group members as the leeway would work for the success in the lesson. Teacher's interference in assigning group members can prove detrimental and frustrating. The teacher, thus, shoulders the responsibility for creating a win-win situation and may only intervene if, there are dominators in a particular group, ensuring the presence of mediators to reduce the possible negative effects faced by introverts.

Workshops for Students

Several forms of workshops can be conducted at all levels of learning to instill confidence during oral presentations. By creating awareness of their varied potentials, the students would be more receptive towards role play. Teachers can identify learners who suffer low self-esteem, are passive and demonstrate withdrawal during lessons and give them regular refreshment courses. They must be made to realise the unexplored potential in them, and that they are not as backward as they perceive themselves. These workshops must be conducted at various stages and progress must be monitored, to assess improvements. Another workshop is the conflict resolution workshop, targeted at identifying leaders and problem solvers. Since dominators are inevitable, mediators are necessary in such events to bridge the gap of communication. Participants can learn how to balance harmony as well as boost confidence and social relations.

Conclusion

Evidently, the role of role play in the language classroom is crucial. It is a profitable pedagogical strategy since many learners (particularly Malay learners) are relational learners who like collaborative work in accomplishing classroom tasks. So, why marginalise role play? Efforts ought to be initiated at all levels to revive this evergreen pedagogical technique. Language learning is a process; hence, do 'play' all the time with role play and re-inject fun in the English Language class. It is the aspiration of our education system to churn out scholars who are self-directed and able to contribute to the progress of the country to realise Vision 2020. The key to high language proficiency is practice, practice and practice. Role play provides avenues for students to practise everyday language use (in and outside class) through social communicative style and information communicative style. So, let us bring back the seemingly outmoded language activity of role play into our classes to introduce fun into learning and bring smiles to our learners' faces.

References

- Al-Arishi, A. Y. 1994. Role-play, real play, and surreal-play in the ESOL classroom. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 48(4):337-346.
- Bambrough, P. 1994. *Simulations in English Teaching*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Canale, M. & Swain, M. 1980. *Approaches to Communicative Competence*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Coopersmith, S. & Feldman, R. 1974. Fostering a Positive Self-Concept High Self-Esteem in the Classroom. In R.H. Cop & K. White (eds). *Psychological Concepts in the Classroom*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dennison, B. & Kirk, R. 1990. *Do, Review, Learn, Apply: A Simple Guide to Experiential Learning*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Di Pietro, R. J. 1987. *Strategic Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haris Md. Jadi 1992. Reformasi Kurikulum di Malaysia: Satu pandangan ke atas proses perancangan, pembinaan dan perlaksanaanya. *Jurnal Pendidik dan Pendidikan*, 11: 1-14.
- Hurt, H. T., Scott, M. D. & McCroskey, J. C. 1978. *Communication in the Classroom*. West Virginia: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

- Joyce, B., Weil, M. & Showers, B. 1992. *Models of Teaching*. (4th edn). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Jones, K. 1988. *Interactive Learning Events: A Guide for facilitators*. London: Kogan Page.
- Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia: 2000. Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- Kirk, R. 1987. *Learning in Action - Activities for Personal and Group Development*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Ladousse, G. P. 1987. *Role Play*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Naginder Kaur 1999. Role Play: The relationship between self-concept and learner participation in an experiential learning process. Unpublished Masters of Education (M.Ed.) Dissertation. USM Malaysia.
- Reid, J. 1987. The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1): 87-106.
- Sharan, S. & Sharan, Y. 1976. *Small-Group Teaching*. Educational Technology Publications
- Shavelson, R. J., Hubner, J. J. & Stanton, G. C. 1976. Self-Concept: validation of construct interpretations. *Review of Educational Research*, 46:407-441.
- Tedick, D. J. & Walker, C. L. 1994. Second language teacher education: The problems that plague us. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(3):300-312.
- Thatcher, D. 1990. Experience as Learning: Implications for training and operation. *Simulations / Games for Learning*, 20 (3): 276-302.
- Van Ments, M. 1989. *The Effective Use of Role Play*. (Revised edn). London: Kogan Page.
- Van Ments, M. 1990. *Active Talk*. London: Kogan Page.
- Wolsk, D. 1975. *An Experience-Centred Curriculum*. France: The Unesco Press.