Role Play/Simulations and Second Language Acquisition: Focusing on Developing Communication Skills in English as a Foreign Language

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1. Introduction

This paper will discuss how role play/simulations contribute to improving English communication skills of Japanese college students. Here, role play/ simulations don't fit the therapeutic ones of the psychological professions and the study examines the relationship between these methods and second language acquisition. It was carried out at the School of Economics, Kwansei Gakuin University during the spring semester, 2008. There were 51 students (male 34, female 17) in two classes and they were all in their sophomore year in college. They learned English as a part of their liberal arts curriculum but did not major in it. These classes focused on developing students' communication skills in English by having the students try the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). In the study developing communication skills in English is defined as improvement in English-speaking skills, which includes various elements of stimulating learner's motivations to practice speaking English and other communication skills for effective interpersonal relations. Each class was 90 minutes in length. A role play, lasting about 15 minutes each, was included in nearly every class throughout the semester. The activities of role play were taken from *Communication Strategies, Book1 and Communication Strategies, Book 2* edited by David Paul. The result after finishing all the practices was positive. The following is a description of the study. This paper will start by reviewing the works associated with role play/ simulations.

2. Work related to Role Play/Simulations

Ladousse (1987) describes what role play/simulations are and the advantages of role play in second language acquisition. Role play and simulations are activities in which students play a part either as themselves or as somebody else in a specific situation by assuming a role. Both of them are very similar and it is almost impossible to make the distinctions between the two. However, while role play is quite simple, brief and flexible, simulations are complex, lengthy, and inflexible. In simulations students are playing themselves in a highly constraining situation, on the other hand, in role plays they are playing imaginary characters in more open-ended situations. There are several advantages of role play: First, students can experience a wide variety of situations corresponding to a real need in the students' lives in a safe environment in

the classroom. For example, people who need to learn English in order to go to work or travel in an international context can have a very useful rehearsal for real life. Second, role play is one of a whole gamut of communicative techniques that helps students speak their second language fluently. It also promotes interaction in the classroom, increasing motivation. Third, it is fun. Students enjoy letting their imagination rip. Fourth, it encourages students to take part in the activity because it provides them with a mask. They don't feel that their own personality is implicated.

Tompkins (1998) points out that role playing/ simulation brings up effective interpersonal relations and social transactions. Participants need to do their best in the given situation by accepting the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions. In order to achieve their role responsibilities, they have to associate with others in the role playing/ simulation, using effective social skills. It promotes genuine communication, active involvement, and a positive attitude. The simulated "real life" problems help the participants develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills. It also fosters thinking and creativity, allowing participants to improve and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relaxed atmosphere. Role play/simulation is a very valuable technique for second language acquisition

Kaur (2002) mentions that role play is a platform that creates self-directed and autonomous learners. It improves communicative competence and enhances self-concept. For example, by following procedures for task completion, learners take charge through self-awareness, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring during and after the process. This is based on a student-centered learning approach in which learners are free to interact with each other spontaneously. Because they have learned how to use available resources for themselves, they are able to carry out the process independently. This encourages the formation of self-directed, empowered and autonomous learners. Communicative competence, the ability to use language appropriately, is developed in role play. Learners obtain the ability to make use of knowledge appropriately as well as knowledge of phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics in actual communications. In addition, there is a positive relationship between self-concept and learners' participation in role play. Self-concept involves perceptions of oneself as derived from self-attributions, interaction with significant others. The interplay and overlapping of various facets such as the academic self-concept, the social- self concept, the emotional self-concept, and the physical self-concept support the general self-concept. In role play self-concept bears a relationship with motivation as the affective domain grows alongside the acquisition of knowledge. Continued opportunities to speak in English in role play develop learners' communication skills in English, improving learners' academic self-concept, emotional self-concept and social self-concept as their confidences in English communications grow. Learners develop a positive self-concept through participation in role play.

Schellin (2006) gives us two examples of role play using telephone conversations carried out in a communicative classroom in a women's junior college. In Role Play 1, Student A calls Tomoko Suzuki. If Tomoko is not at home, she tries to find out when

she will be back and leaves a message that she will call back. Student B is a family member of Tomoko. She doesn't know where she is but knows she will come back in about an hour. In Role Play 2 Student A works for a company. The company invites a famous person who is going to give a lecture. However, there are too many seats left in the upcoming lecture. She calls the clients and asks them to attend the lecture. Student B is a client whose name is Carol. She has already declined to attend the lecture because she had a plan. But she receives a telephone call again and has to decide whether she will attend the lecture. Student C is a client whose name is Diane. She has also rejected attending the lecture because the last lecture was not as good as she had expected. She receives a telephone call again and decides if she will go. She doesn't have any special plans on that day. Schellin says that students got a chance to further develop their telephone skills in these role plays. They also improved their decision-making skills through the processes of persuasion and negotiation.

3. Material

Ten patterns of the role plays selected from *Communication Strategies*, Book1&2 by David Paul were introduced to the students during the semester. These books cover a wide range of interesting topics students might experience. The activities chosen were of intermediate level and every activity was to be practiced in pair.

Role play 1: Telephoning a friend

> Student A: Telephone Student B and ask him/her out seven different places over the next week.
> Student B: Refuse the first six invitations, giving a different reason each time. Accept the last invitation.

Role play 2: Looking for a house (an apartment)

> Student A: You are a person looking for a house (an apartment) for your family.
> Student B: You are working in a real estate agency. You show Student A some houses and apartments, explaining the advantage of each.

Role play 3: Apologizing with reasons

> Student A: You live in a big city and have to commute to work. You are late for work six days in a row. Apologize to your boss and give reasons.
> Student B: You are Student A's boss. You are not happy about the situation.

Role play 4: Proposing marriage

> Student A: Ask Student B to marry you. Make promises about what you will do if he/she accepts your proposal.
> Student B: Consider whether to accept or not

Role play 5: Stopped by the police

> Student A: You are a highway police officer. You have stopped Student B for speeding, and you now find Student B doesn't have a license and there are many things wrong with Student B's car.
>
> Student B: Try to think of good excuses.

Role play 6: At the pet shop

> Student A: You work in a pet shop. Help Student B find a pet.
>
> Student B: You are looking for a pet. Ask about the good points and bad points of various pets and how to take care of them.

Role play 7: Giving a guided tour

> Student A: You are a tour guide. Imagine you are showing Student B around the local area or another place you are familiar with. Explain about local places of interest.
>
> Student B: You are a tourist. Ask questions about the various places he/she shows you.

Role play 8: Making excuses

> Student A: You are a kidnapper who has been stopped by the police. You have to think of reasons for having the following things with you: a suitcase full of money, a photograph of the persons who has just been kidnapped, a large bag of food, pile of newspapers with words cut out, a knife, a gun, and a hand grenade.
>
> Student B: You are the police office who has just stopped Student A.

Role play 9: Complaining

> Student A: Complaining about all the things you don't like ? at home, at school, at work.
>
> Student B: Argue with Student A.

Role play 10: Trying to convince somebody that you have seen a ghost

> Student A: Try to convince Student B that you have seen a ghost.
>
> Student B: You don't believe Student A's story. Be cynical and ask questions about what happened.

4. Analyses based on Questionnaire and Observation

After 51 students (male 34, female 17) finished the ten role plays, a questionnaire was distributed to everyone. The contents of the questionnaire and their answers are following:

Questionnaire

1. Did you enjoy role plays? Did you have a fun?   Yes (38)   No (13)
2. Did role plays motivate you to speak in English? Yes (39)   No (12)
3. Did role plays encourage you to express yourselves in a more forthright way?
         Yes (29)   No (22)
4. Did you learn English expressions you could use in real life? For instance, did you
   get how to say when you declined something and when you apologized?
         Yes (41)   No (10)
5. Did you have useful rehearsals (experiences) to talk to English-speaking people?
         Yes (28)   No (23)
6. Did role plays help you memorize English expressions easily?
         Yes (32)   No (19)
7. Did you have role plays with your partners cooperatively in relaxed (safe)
   atmosphere?
         Yes (43)   No (8)
8. Others (Any opinions and comments are fine.)

Q1. Did you enjoy role plays? Did you have a lot of fun?

Of 51 students, 38 students said "Yes" and 13 answered "No". It means almost 75 percent of learners enjoyed the role plays, having a fun. There was a lot of laughter in class. For example, when we tried Role play 3: Apologizing with reasons, a student whose role was boss said passionately, "You are late again! What did you do?" His partner then explained his situation briefly in English and answered, "I was run over by a big car and almost died. I went to hospital. My situation was very serious. But from the hospital I ran and ran to come here." People in the class laughed, saying, "Did you go to hospital by yourself in spite of your near death experience? Can a person in a serious situation run so soon? You recovered so quickly!"

In another example of Role play 3 Student A was extremely modest. He very much felt guilty because he was late for work six times in a row. He apologized with excuses again and again from the bottom his heart. Finally he honestly said, "My alarm clock was broken and didn't go off. I overslept." Student B understood his good personality and she kindly mentioned, "I'll present a new alarm to you." without being angry. Many students had a soft laugh since their conversation was nice.

When it came to Role play 4: Proposing marriage, it was difficult to pair a boy with a girl because the number of boys (34) was larger than that of girls (17). For this reason, a male student had to make a proposal to another male student. Although a student taking Student A's role tried to woo Student B into marrying him, speaking," I always want to be with you. I really need you. I love you." Student B rejected him and said," I'm not interested in men. Yucky!" Everyone in the class laughed in chorus.

All stories depended on students' imaginations. After given a situation they freely imagined something and created various stories. Through the role plays students

develpoed good relationships, getting together through the conversation in order to make their plays successful. Role play is fun and students enjoy letting their imagination rip (Ladousse, 1987). It fosters thinking and creativity, bringing up effective interpersonal relations and social transactions (Tompkins, 1998).

Q 2 Did role plays motivate you to speak in English? 39 learners said, "Yes" and 12 did "No". 77 % of all the students answered "Yes". This method is used in pairs in order that everyone would have enough opportunities to speak. Because a big group sometimes prevents shy people from taking participate in a conversation, pair practices help them get more chances to discuss. As a result, the responsibility to present something seemed to enhance their self-initiative, and autonomy, motivating both students to speak spontaneously and actively. Kaur (2002) makes a point that role play is a platform that creates self-directed and autonomous learners. In addition to responsibility to present, positive reactions from classmates also motivated people to talk willingly because they developed their self-concepts through the role plays. Role play enhances self-concept (Kaur, 2002).

Q 3 Did role plays encourage you to express yourselves in a more forthright way? According the questionnaire, 29 students (57%) said "Yes" and 22 students (43%) said, "No". The atmosphere in the class was relaxed and students were allowed to say anything. There were no strict rules related the role plays. In Role play 9: Complaining especially, participants seemed to address whatever they wanted. Student A in Role play 9 complains about anything he/she doesn't like – at home, at school, and at work. Student B argues with Student A. Most of the participants in the Student A role explained their problems at their home, school, and work. For instance:

1. " My mother always speaks to me in a scolding manner and treats me like a child."
2. " I have a part-time job at a restaurant. My boss is extremely strict about cleaning a floor. I have to polish the floor every time. It is tough."
3. " I take a hard class, having a plenty of homework every week. The day before the class I need to study until late."

Sometimes their plays were very real. Although Student B here needed to argue with Student A, some participants playing as Student B agreed with what their partners said. They seemed to frankly mention what they hesitated to say in Japanese because this practice was a play where they were allowed to express anything. Role play encourages students to take part in the activity because it provides them with a mask. They don't feel that their own personality is implicated (Ladousse, 1987).

Q 4 Did you learn English expressions you could use in real life? For instance, did you get how to say when you declined something and when you apologized? 41 students (84%) said, "Yes" and 10 students (16%) said, "No" . For instance, in Role play 1: Telelphoning a friend, some expressions were introduced. For example, the descriptions for Student A are:

    1. Are you doing anything on Monday?
    2. I'm thinking of eating out on Tuesday night.
    3. Would you like to come, too?

The sentences for Student B are:

      1. I'm sorry but I'm busy on Monday. I'll be getting ready for a test.

      2. I wish I could, but I have to go to the gym.

      3. I'd love to come. Thank you for asking.

In Role play 1 learning phrases to decline, such as "I'm sorry but. . . . .", "I wish I could. . . . .", and " I'd love to. . . . ." was one of the aims for the students.

    Furthermore, the students learned some phrases of apology for being late in Role play 3. For instance, they learned:

      1. I'm sorry I'm late. My alarm didn't go off and I overslept.

      2. I apologize for being late again. I missed the train.

      3. I'm extremely sorry for being late again. There was a big traffic jam.

Student B' s responses are:

      1. You shouldn't go out late every night.

      2. Did you oversleep again?

      3. Make sure it doesn't happen again.

    Each role play includes six examples for students to use (three for Student A and three for student B). Since the learners covered ten role plays, they actually practiced sixty cases with useful vocabularies. Because of this, 84 % of the learners seemed to answer "Yes" . These examples were sometimes good warm- up exercises to elicit students' ideas and own personal experiences because they took a little time to get used to the situation. They also helped other students when they stuck for ideas and did not know what to say.

    Q 5 Did you have useful rehearsals (experiences) to talk to English-speaking people? 28 students (55%) agreed and 23 students (45%) disagreed. A student who was going to English school in New York during the summer vacation said, " Role play 2: Looking for a house (an apartment) and Role play 7: Giving a guided tour are especially useful. Although I don't have to look for an apartment this time, I would need to do this for my long study abroad in the future. Role play 7 is helpful because I'm planning to do sightseeing in New York." Landousse (1987) points out that People who need to learn English in order to go to work or travel in an international context can have a very useful rehearsal for real life. Some participants reported that they didn't have opportunities to talk with English-speaking people. However, since a lot of people go to foreign countries for leisure nowadays, some role plays such as Role play 7 would give them a good opportunity to experience a significant rehearsal.

    Some examples from Role play 2 and Role play 7 are the following.

Role play 2

      1. I'm looking for a small house that isn't too far from the station?

      2. What is the neighborhood like?

      3. Is there enough space in the living room for my pet?

Role play 7

      1. Could you tell me a little about the castle's history?

      2. Why was he famous?

3. Are there any good art galleries or museums in the area?
These were just examples to help students. They tried a variety of expressions to promote their conversations, sometimes using the examples.

Q 6 Did role plays help you memorize English expressions easily? 32 participants (63%) answered "Yes" and 19 (37%) said, " No" . In Role play 6: At the pet shop, the situation is that Student A is looking for a pet and Student B helps Student A as a clerk in the pet shop. Student B tries to sell a pet to Student A. A student playing the role of Student B encouraged his partner to buy a pet, introducing various kinds of animals and saying, "How about. . . . ? Why don't you take. . . . ?" Student B also needed to explain good points of each animal and how to take care of it. Student B told us that he had memorized the phrases, "How about. . . . ? and Why don't you. . . . ?" because he used them many times. Meanwhile Student A talked about her opinions after finishing the role play. She said, "It was kind of difficult for me to decide which pet I should pick out. I was seriously thinking and thinking about my pet through the negotiation with Student B. Finally, I could decide my pet and bought it." When she bought her pet, she said, "I'll take it." She was happy when she at last could use the phase. She reported, "This phrase stood out in my memory because I could finally say it after using my head."

Regarding Role play 10: Trying to convince somebody that you have seen a ghost, Student A has to convince Student B that Student A has seen a ghost. It was hard for a student playing Student A to do that because her friend seemed not to believe the existence of ghosts. Student B completely ignored what she said. However, Student A did her best, using phases like "I'm not making this up!" and "I'm telling the truth that. . . . ." After the role play Student A presented, "Although I didn't know the meaning of 'make up' before, I excellently got it today."

After examining the examples mentioned above, we may conclude that it is easier for us to memorize English with some impressive and effective situations. Role plays have a lot of opportunities to be happened memorable and unknown events. Using this approach is better for students than just purely memorizing English expressions. In addition, from the example of Role play 6 where Student A finally decided which pet to take after the negotiation with her partner we can understand that role plays help learners develop their decision?making skills. Schellin (2006) remarks that role plays improve students' decision-making skills through the processes of persuasion and negotiation.

Q 7 Did you have role plays with your partners cooperatively in relaxed (safe) atmosphere? 43 students (84%) said "Yes" and 8 students (16%) answered "No" . Needless to say, a lot of people in the class felt relaxed in a friendly and cooperative environment. Because this approach is a play, it provides a safe atmosphere. Nothing negative actually happened to anybody even if he/she got a negative result. For instance, the situation of Role play 3 is that Student A needs to apologize to his/ her boss because he/she is late for work six days in a row. Although Student A in one pair excused himself, expressing his regret, he was not successful. His boss was a kind of

severe person and Student A was fired. If the role play were a reality, it would be a big problem for him. After finishing the role play, everyone laughed without any actual unhappy consequence for Student A.

In the same way, in Role play 4: Proposing marriage Student A passionately asked Student B to marry him, saying, "I'll buy a big diamond ring for you and pledge to love you forever." But Student B answered, "I can't trust you. Your love should be temporary. Basically, I don't love you. " Student A cried, "Oh, my god! I wan to kill myself. I can't live without you." However, the fact was that he didn't die because he was not hurt at all.

The last example is from Role play 5: Stopped by the police. This is a conversation between a person speeding in his/her car without a license and a police officer. In the play some students couldn't explain their case sufficiently and lost their licenses, paying penalties. The other students had to go to the police station to be examined. However, in reality, everyone was safe. Since they were safe whatever they said, it made their conversation dynamic and active in a relaxed situation. Students can experience a wide variety of situations corresponding to a real need in the students' lives in a safe environment in the classroom (Laudousse, 1987).

Q 8 Others (Any opinions and comments are fine.)   Although not many students answered this part, some students did. Their opinions and comments are:

1. He/she enjoyed the class, getting many useful expressions.
2. Because he/she doesn't like English, the class was a little hard for him/her. But it was a good technique to improve communication skills in English.
3. He/she wanted to have more time for this approach. Time was too short to summarize the whole. (Since time was limited, we spent only about 15 minutes or so for each role play.)
4. He/she could create a lot of English phrases and expressions, by eliciting what he/she had and using his/her imaginations. He/She tried to use the phrases and expressions when having opportunities to speak to someone in English.

4. Conclusion

The class mainly focused on improving students' listening and reading scores especially for TOEIC. Because the students didn't have enough opportunities to speak English in the classroom, the role plays were brought in. In order to help learners be interested in the vehicle topics that were relevant to their daily lives were selected. They began their plays after becoming familiar with a situation for each role play through the instructor's explanation. This was presented along with useful expressions and vocabularies. Since it seemed to be difficult for them to improvise dialogue, they were given about five minutes of preparation time before a role play. During the five minutes they took notes about their stories, talking to their partners. They generally played their roles smoothly after the preparation. As long as we had time, they presented their plays in front of the class.

Regarding the useful expressions and vocabularies, as the study described earlier, the students learned sixty examples in total with important words. The examples were helpful in promoting their speaking. They usually developed their   conversations by eliciting their experiences and using expressions that were similar to or related to the given sentences. Selective input (only six examples for each role play) produced high output and the students expanded their plays. However, some of the learners sometimes followed them too closely and simply repeated the sentences offered, instead of developing their own resources. In this case, the instructor encouraged them not to adhere to the examples but to develop their own expressions based on the situation.

As for feedback, after all the participants finished their role plays, the instructor gave them some comments and advice about their mistakes associated with grammar, pronunciations and so forth. She didn't correct their mistakes one by one during their conversations so as not to disturb and confuse them. In reality they didn't have a lot of grammatical mistakes because most of the participants had a good general foundation of the English language, used simple English and had preparation time, taking notes and sometimes looking into a dictionary. In addition, it was a pair practice and the two persons checked each other's English in the preparation time. She paid attention to common grammatical mistakes and pronunciations.

As a result, we can say that this approach was successful in improving participants' communication skills in English because more than fifty percent of the students accepted "Yes" in every item of the questionnaire. Additionally, the result of the analyses based on the questionnaire and observations supported the findings of the work related to role play/simulations mentioned earlier. Fostering self-directed and autonomous, enhancing self-concept, and providing students with a mask positively stimulated learners' motivation to practice speaking English. Furthermore, encouraging imagination and creativity, having useful rehearsal for real life in a safe environment, improving students' decision-making skills, and bringing up effective interpersonal relations and social transactions, needless to say, very much contributed to better communication.

Finally, this research didn't analyze the students having "No" and their reasons for such. As the paper discussed in the introduction, the students were not English majors and there seemed to be some learners who didn't like English. Why these people were not interested in the technique, how they should be encouraged to take part in the approach and so on will be the focus of subsequent research. Moreover, it may be interesting to consider how peer evaluation motivates students to participate in role play/simulations.

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