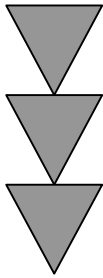
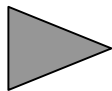


ROLE-PLAY OR REAL PLAY?

**Marinela GRĂNESCU**

Abstract

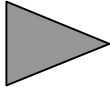
The article presents some insights concerning the features that distinguish role-plays from simulation and that make both of them come close to real-life games. Comments upon the behaviour of the students in two groups who have been exposed to role-plays and simulations for a longer period of time are also made.



Introduction

More and more people today want to be effective speakers in a foreign language and engineering students are no exception. I have been teaching English for many years to undergraduates in engineering of various levels of English, interests and motivation and have found that they are increasingly becoming aware of the means put at their disposal by their foreign language teachers, among which role-play and simulation play an important part.

Some of these activities are part of the language practice of the course work related to a specific topic, others are simply spontaneous ways of serving other specialisms. It is tempting for the teacher to resort to role-plays in order to develop the students' speaking skills, as they make the language sound more real and up to date, and help the learners use it in life-like situations. I have found that the topic, the level, the organisation, the preparation and the time allotted to such activities are elements that must be well considered if the aims and objectives of the class are to be fulfilled.



Role-plays and simulations – effective LSP learning activities

Role-play is one of the most effective techniques used in the classroom to give the lesson the flavour of life. Fairly easy to organise, it contributes to motivating the learners, by preparing them for various situations that can come up in their future professional careers, and helping them deal with the unpredictable. The students can be trained so as to be able to respond and react in a range of speaking situations, and, by extension, in any situation of the kind. The types of structures, the vocabulary, the functions and the pronunciation, intonation, word stress are all exploited.

Role-plays can be double-oriented, according to experts in the field. First, role-play is *message-oriented* (Black and Butzkamm, 1977) as the foreign language is used as a means, as a vehicle of communication. There are instances when communicative situations in the classroom develop on the spot, for example when comments upon the latest football match or about somebody's new dress can be heard in everyday situations, mainly in the mother tongue. Of course, the language level is elementary (even native speakers use the lowest level of their potential linguistic resources in such contexts) and the role-play comes near to a real play with words. This is the first situation that, if practised long enough, can turn into a real game in a language class.

More important for the same authors is the *language oriented communication*, when skills to communicate in the foreign language are formed and consolidated or developed. As in most communicative speaking-related activities, role-play is based upon *information gap and opinion gap*. The information gap forces students to exchange information and to find a solution, (as in jigsaw tasks, problem-solving activities, guessing games), while opinion gaps are created by exercises that include

ideas in conflict. In this case speakers are asked to put forward and defend their ideas, feelings, focus etc. These two types of gaps can help the teacher create challenging communicative situations.

Role-plays as well as simulations improve students' performance in oral interactions, train them in all four skills, practising on what students have learned during the previous classes. These two types of activities are not easily distinguished from each other. Both are forms of games related to a definite – often small and narrow – slice of life.

Methodologists say that simulations are “highly structured” (Klippel, 1991), more diverse in content and procedure, being “simplified patterns of human interactions or social processes where the players participate in roles”(Jones, 1982). During the simulation the participants must be supplied with background information and material to work upon during and before the simulation itself. Just as in real life, the simulation must be finished and the task must be accomplished within a time limit that is set according to the demand made (e.g. to write a job offer which must be sent in time to appear in tomorrow's newspaper).

In contrast to simulations, role-plays are often small scenes that can be realistic (e.g. acting out a shopping situation) or a question of fantasy, such as pretending to interview a Martian working with their own type of computer. There are many materials for role-plays, which suggest a variety of ways of enacting everyday situations. What is really important is to create effective language learning situations, to make available varied materials, to use role cards or cue cards, to guide the speakers.

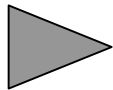
Role-plays are demanding in the foreign language as the language used by the interlocutors must be correct and accurate, as well as adapted to the role acted out as closely as possible. Style and register are problematic issues, as even native speakers may not be able to make use of the best style or register. Considering the situations that engineering students are most likely to encounter, the level of formality should not be very high.

Among the main requirements of using role-plays in class one can mention:

- well-defined aims, in accordance with the level of the students;

- initial practice in pairs, so that undergraduates can get accustomed to this type of interaction with its specific demands;
- last but not least, thorough preparation.

TV interviews, telephoning, discussions on controversial topics, setting up a business, job interviews, designing a radio or TV programme are examples of role-plays I have used in my teaching. Simulations on topics such as “you and the environment”, “you and alternatives”, “you and the media”, originating from *Themes* (Mathews and Read, 1989) have also been used.



A small-scale study of learners' behaviour during role-plays

➤ **The students included in the research**

For the purpose of this study I focused on a group of 25 students in Industrial Design and 23 in Economic Engineering from the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca. The students were part of this project for 10 weeks out of 14 in two semesters. Both groups had the same number of classes (a two-hour seminar per week). They were of the same age and general background, in the same year of study (the second out of five academic years) and the number of boys exceeded the number of girls by three in each group.

➤ **Instructions to the undergraduates during the observation period**

The students were instructed on all the steps, stages, preparation required to carry out simulations and role-plays. The teacher even resorted to their capacity to understand the value of this type of activity, as young adults. All the activities were allotted a certain amount of time (preparation time plus action time) according to Klippel's *Keep talking* (1991).

➤ **Focus of the observation and findings**

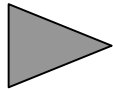
I tried to put under observation the students' interaction with their peers, their interest, motivation expressly manifested, the observance of the time allotted and the involvement of the individuals.

In the early sessions, I noticed that all the participants stood up and at first tried to assess the availability of their peers by means of eye contact. Then, however, most of the 'actors' increasingly avoided looking at their peers in ever subtler ways. After acting out their respective parts, discussions were held and it came out that the reasons for not maintaining eye contact was either that the participants were intimidated by their interlocutors or that they had been advised by family members to stick to their job and not to mind the 'audience'. The former attitude can be overcome by careful psychological training during other sessions; the latter is to be counteracted from the perspective of the culture behind it, as most young people are taught that school is competition, finding employment also involves competition and that the most important thing to do is to complete one's job irrespective of how it is presented to one's public. In very few cases, the students confessed that they were afraid of their peers' reaction because they had not prepared the content well enough. As far as motivation and enthusiasm are concerned, they lacked in the majority of the 'actors'. This was somewhat surprising to me, as I had allowed the learners to select their partners, while the topics related to their specialism were compulsory for each group. Later on, I found out that they had been advised (by specialism teachers) not to be very enthusiastic, but rather serious, polite, introvert. This attitude may also be part of our cultural background, which associates the notion of politeness to self-containment and lack of active involvement.

The students prepared to role-play according to the role cards or cues, but there were many who did not like to be restricted by their cards and tried to be more personal, including phrases heard in films, song lyrics, other language sources. On the other hand, they tended to speak much too quickly and in a very loud voice, which impaired upon the final impression and made some of the interlocutors uncomfortable. As for the introductory sentences, all the students used them, not by merely copying the phrases learnt during the course, but also by making them more personal.

Humour lacked (with the exception of four cases). This can be explained by the rush as well as the concern of losing face if making a joke to which the others would not respond.

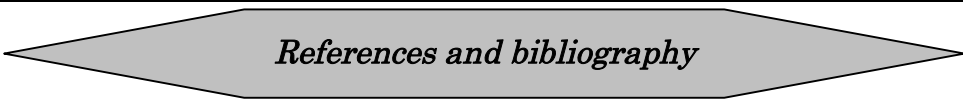
Timing and pacing represented the most difficult aspects. Students either continuously looked at their watches, or spoke too quickly and said things like “I’m sorry, I just have two more words to say:...” . This proved that, although no special technique should be applied, careful preparation and practice are essential in keeping the time.



Final remarks

Even before being exposed to the role-play technique in their English classes, most of the students realized the importance of good speaking skills and admitted that they were worth developing. However, very few looked for opportunities while in the classroom, as they had some general feeling of apprehension, also described as “nerves”, or “embarrassment to talk to my fellow countryman in a foreign language”.

By the end of the 10-week period that constituted the time-frame of the study, the same students admitted that the use of the technique for a long time had developed their capacity to improve their speaking skills, particularly their fluency. The fact that some role-plays were recorded also made them aware of the pronunciation, stress, intonation mistakes and other errors and represented an impetus for self-control, a challenge and an opportunity to experience “a school with a difference”.



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