

8 Using Role Play to Promote Oral Fluency

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1 INTRODUCTION

Role play, as defined by Livingstone (1983), is a classroom activity which gives the students the opportunity to practise the language they may need outside the classroom. It is a speaking activity which improves communicative competence and provides practice in contexts which simulate real-life experience. My learners of English are children who have limited oral ability in using English. Their oral contributions in class involve mainly repeating what the teacher says or answering the teacher's questions. They have some knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but cannot use this in oral production. In this study I wanted to examine whether using role plays with these learners would improve their oral fluency in English.

2 DEVELOPING L2 ORAL FLUENCY

2.1 Real-Life Oral Communication

There are many common features of spoken language: colloquialisms, ellipsis, deixis, false starts, repetition and rephrasing, back-channelling, vague language, run-ons and overlaps (Bygate, 1987). Therefore, learners need classroom activities which enable them to develop the skills to participate in oral interactions which have these characteristics. In addition, learners need to develop communication strategies: According to Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994), we use communication strategies when communication breakdowns occur or when communication is difficult. They argue that learners can use a number of achievement strategies to attempt to remain in the conversation and convey their message. These strategies can be either co-operative or non-co-operative. Co-operative strategies can, for example, involve asking the speaker to repeat or to give examples to clarify their message. Non-co-operative strategies occur when the speaker uses their own resources to address a communication breakdown - e.g. by paraphrasing or using gesture.

The oral skills and strategies noted above can be promoted in the classroom through communicative activities. Nunan (1998) defines the communicative task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form”. According to Littlewood (1981), communicative work can include functional activities (e.g. problem-solving activity) or social activities (e.g. role play). According to Harmer (2001), in a successful communicative task the learners should have a desire to talk, they should have a purpose for communicating, they should focus on content not on form and they should also use a variety of language.

Fluency in speaking relates to “the learner’s capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation” (Thornbury, 2000:3). Communicative tasks which develop fluency, according to Thornbury (2000), are those where the focus is on the message not on the form. Fluency and acceptable language should be the primary goal in these activities (Richard & Rodgers, 2001) rather than accuracy.

2.2 Role Play

Ments (1999) says that role play involves “asking someone to imagine that they are either themselves or another person in a particular situation”. They may take the role of real people or themselves. Al-Mutawa & Kailani (1989) describe role play as a technique that affords an opportunity to practise a new structure in the context of natural communicative usage.

2.2.1 *The Value of Role Play*

According to Lucantoni (2002), role play can be very enjoyable for learners and provide excellent opportunities for using language in real life situations. It is a communicative activity where the learners can use spontaneous language. It also helps learners to develop real life speaking skills. Ments (1999) and Livingstone (1983) agree that role play increases learners’ motivation and involvement in the learning process. Ments (1999) adds that role play lends itself well to mixed ability groups and that it provides learners with opportunities to practise and develop communication strategies. Role play can also require the learners to use their imagination, background knowledge and communications skills. Larsen-Freeman (1986) and Edwards (1999) point out that role plays, whether structured or less structured, are important in the communicative approach because they give learners an opportunity to practise communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles.

2.2.2 *Disadvantages of Role Play*

Role play also has certain potential disadvantages. Ments (1999) notes that discipline may be hard to maintain during role play and the teacher could lose control of the class. He adds that role play can be time-consuming and also make demands on space and other resources. Thornbury (2005) also notes that “there are learners who feel self conscious performing in front of their peers...and care has to be exercised in choosing and setting up such activities”. Teachers must be careful during role play, then, not to make any learners feel embarrassed.

2.2.3 Organizing Role Play

Role plays, like any learning activities, should be “appropriate for the children’s age and social-cultural experience” (Cameron, 2001:30). The activity should give learners opportunities to use language they know and should start with simple dialogues before moving on to more advanced interactions. Additionally, the role play should be interesting, exciting and motivating. Furthermore, role plays should create a context where learners pay more attention to the message than to the accuracy of their language.

In preparation for role play, learners may need to be introduced to key vocabulary and expressions they will be able to use. Role cards or cue cards, as Bygate (1987) suggests, can also be provided to learners to explain the roles they will be taking on. Then learners should be given “enough time ... to read any necessary information and to formulate their ideas” (Lucantoni, 2002:51). During role plays teachers should encourage learners and reassure them that no penalties will be imposed on them for hesitations or mistakes (Al-Saadat & Afifi, 1997).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of using role play to improve the oral fluency of Grade 4 learners. My main question was: to what extent does learners’ oral fluency improve through participating in a series of role play activities?

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were three Grade 4 learners. They were 9-10 years old and in their fourth year of learning English. They were following the Basic Education curriculum using the course book English for Me (EFM). I chose learners whose ability in English was good.

3.3 Data Collection

I collected data in this study by asking my learners to participate in a series of four role play activities over a period of four months. I adapted these activities from Hadfield & Hadfield (1999) in order to make them more appropriate for my Grade 4 learners. The role play cards used are given in the appendix. In each case the learners were given the role cards and had to read them and to assume one of the roles (there were three roles in each role play). I distributed the cards a day before the activity and asked the learners to prepare themselves for the next day. Before the role plays I introduced the new vocabulary. I also introduced some expressions which learners needed to use in the activities, such as excuse me, sorry, and thank you. I also encouraged the learners to use communication strategies such as using gestures and asking for clarification.

During the role plays (which were done in specially arranged sessions out of class) I video recorded the learners at work and made observational notes about them. One advantage of video recording is that “it can be replayed and examined

many times and can capture many details of the lesson” (Richards & Lockhart, 1996:11). The video thus allowed me to analyze learners’ performance in the role plays in detail. In particular, I examined learners’ language, both how much they said and what they said. I also paid attention to their interactions and fluency.

I analyzed the data quantitatively. I measured the lengths of the runs (average number of syllables in an utterance) in their speech during the four role play activities. I also counted the number of the turns in each role play activity for each learner.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Length of Runs

Figure 1 shows the length of runs for each learner (P1, P2 and P3) during the four role plays (RP1-RP4). This information was extracted from the video recordings of learners’ work during these role plays.

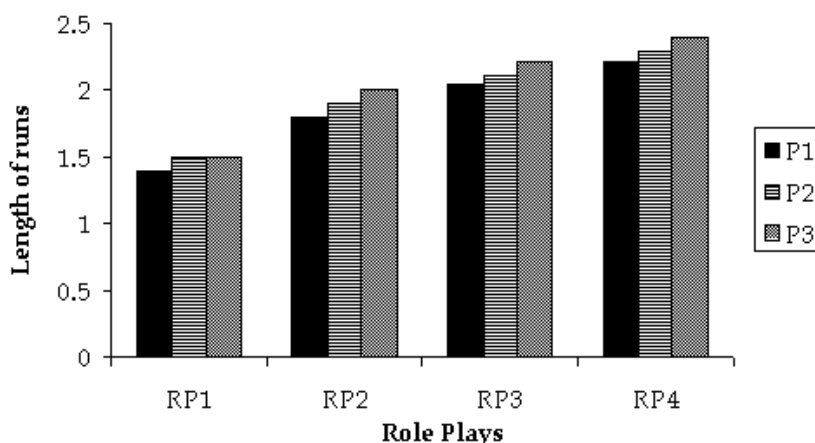


Figure 1: Length of runs for three learners in four role plays

This figure shows that the length of runs – i.e. the average number of syllables spoken by learners without lengthy pauses – increased gradually over the four role plays. As can be seen from the chart, the length of the runs increased gradually for each learner during the four role plays. For example, in the first role play P1’s run length was 1.45 syllables and this increased to 2.2 syllables by RP4. There was a consistent increase in the run lengths for all learners from one role play to the next.

4.2 Number of Turns

Figure 2 shows the number of turns for each learner in the four role plays. No particular pattern of improvement emerges here. This suggests that the number of turns may not be an indicator of fluency. How many turns the learners took would also have been influenced by the particular role they had in each role play.

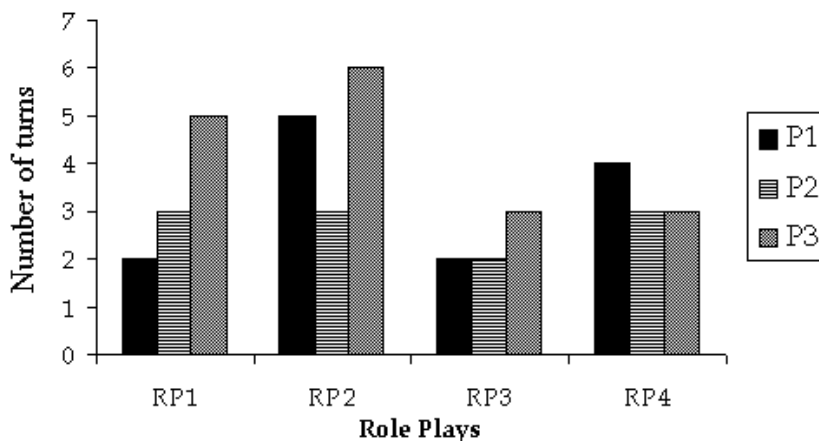


Figure 2: Number of turns for three learners in four role plays

5 DISCUSSION

Thornbury (2000) suggests that the nature of fluency is not so much a matter of the speed of delivery but more to do with length of the run. From this perspective there is evidence in this study that learners' fluency improved over the course of the four role plays. The length of their runs became longer, for all three learners, in a consistent fashion from one role play to the next. Longer runs mean that learners improved in their ability to produce a stream of speech without lengthy gaps. I also noticed as the learners progressed through the role plays that they became less concerned about making errors and focused more on communicating their meanings. They also produced more chunks of language as they moved through the role plays. Riggenschach (2000) states that the ability to speak phrasally rather than word-by-word creates the impression of fluency and this is something these learners did more effectively in the course of this study. Thornbury (2000) notes that "The more words you can put together without pausing the more fluent you are". The learners in this study were pausing less in the final role play than they were in the first.

5.1 Limitations

Although I find the results of this study encouraging there are limitations here which must be acknowledged. The main limitation is that I cannot claim that learners' fluency improved because of the role plays. Over the period of the study the learners were continuing to learn English in class and a certain amount of natural development in their proficiency would have been expected. This study does show that role play encourages more fluent oral production but a more controlled experiment would be needed to make any cause-effect conclusions about role plays and oral fluency. Other limitations relate to the measure of fluency I used (this is but one of many available), the fact that I conducted the role plays in specially arranged sessions for the three participants (and thus the situation was

different to normal classroom learning) and the small number of learners here which means that any conclusions relate only to these individuals.

6 CONCLUSION

Doing this study has been beneficial for me in a number of ways. It has given me an opportunity to learn about the nature of L2 oral fluency and to examine one way – role play - of promoting it with my learners. It has also given me the confidence to use role play more widely in my teaching. Doing this study has also been an valuable introduction to the process of doing research; I have learned much about this process which I will be able to apply to further classroom investigations in my work as a language teacher.

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APPENDIX: ROLE CARDS

Role Play 1

Role 1: You come from Oman. Ask others about their names and their nationalities.

Role 2: You are Japanese. Greet your friends, ask them about their names. Ask about their likes and dislikes.

Role 3: You are Greek. Tell your friend about your name and your nationality.

Role Play 2

Role 1: You want to go to the park and you don't know the way. Ask your friend to tell you where the park is.

Role 2: Listen and follow the directions to the park.

Role 3: Help your friend to find the way to the park.

Role Play 3

Role 1: You go to a restaurant with _____. Ask _____ what she wants. Order the food. Pay the bill.

Role 2: You go to the restaurant with _____. Look at the menu and tell _____ what you would like to eat and drink.

Role 3: You are the waiter. Give the menu to the customers. Take their order. Give them the bill.

Role Play 4

Role 1: You want to go swimming. You hate table tennis. You love the cinema.

Role 2: You want to go cycling. Suggest going to a cinema.

Role 3: You don't want to go swimming because it is cold. You don't have a bicycle. You like table tennis. You love the cinema.