

# The Distinguishing Features of Role Plays in the Classroom

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## **Introduction**

This paper will begin by listing the distinguishing features of the role play under the headings given by Hymes (1982). Next, I will comment on some of my experiences with role play. Lastly, I will discuss some of the merits and faults of role play in the classroom in Japan. Before I continue, allow me to define role play. A convenient definition of a role play is given by Larsen-Freeman (1986): a language teaching ploy that gives the student an opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles, either in a very structured or in a less structured manner. Furthermore, following Lozanov (1982), I see the role play as way of creating a relaxed, comfortable and non-threatening learning environment in which the student can speak more openly and with less inhibition than may be otherwise possible so that psychological barriers, if they exist, can be lifted or alleviated and the student's learning potential can be more closely attained.

## **Section 1: Role Playing and Setting**

1.1 Hymes (1982) first considers Setting, and this idea may be further modified by McDonough & Shaw's (1993) ideas and how they may influence the use of role plays in the classroom.

1.2 the role of English in Japan: let us assume that for most students English is not a regular means of communication in daily life and primarily a subject taught in the school curriculum. Unless it is a group of students who are planning to go abroad in the near future most role plays in my classroom tend to center on topics they may discuss with a foreigner (i.e. their teacher), such as about study, home or work.

1.3 the role of English in the school/classroom: in my particular case, English is a regular means of communication both in the classroom and with all foreign English teachers and is given extra emphasis in the curriculum.

1.4 time: 90 minute classes (twenty-six times a year), adequate time to introduce a new topic in one class period and role play it in either a very structured or less structured manner.

1.5 physical environment: large classrooms for the number of students in the class. Students are seated in a small circle in which eye contact can be made easily and the so-called “hearers” or “audience” (Hymes, 1982) can have better access to the role plays.

1.6 resources available: students are supplied with texts and listening cassettes are frequently used to either introduce a topic for role play or to review a topic with role playing afterwards.

1.7 the sociocultural environment: most text topics are appropriate to the setting (about family, school, travel) with teacher and student roles amply understood. Both the cultural aspects/cultural differences of the country (Japan) in which the role plays are taking place and those cultural aspects/cultural differences of the countries in which English is spoken as

a first language are introduced.

## **Section 2: Role Playing and Participants**

2.1 The second component of speech events proposed by Hymes (1982) is Participants. Hymes names four participant roles; “addressor”, “speaker”, “addressee” and “hearer” or “audience”. The goal of role plays should be to incorporate all the roles mentioned, especially in larger groups where it is more difficult to get all students involved. Many natural/real conversations outside the classroom call for only two roles, the addressor and the addressee, or another more limited configuration. My role plays often include all four roles, one student as an addressor, a second as an addressee, a third (or more) as a hearer/audience and depending on the topic and/or the degree of structure in the role play and myself as the speaker. One role play might involve someone (addressor) inviting a friend (addressee) out to dinner in which the date, time and place have to be agreed upon (and recorded by the hearer). The speaker may act as a guide in the role play to help the students. The speaker (teacher), however, should be careful not to make the restrictions/corrections in the role play too tight/ frequent, which may occur in the traditional classroom (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), so conversation can flow more naturally (i.e. more occurrence of natural turn-taking). All roles should also be carefully explained to the students by the teacher (speaker) prior to the role play since their definitions may not always be very clear (Coulthard, 1985).

## **Section 3: Role Playing and Purpose**

3.1 The roles of English in Japan and in the classroom were briefly stated under Role Playing and Setting. However, purpose is also important, as Donahue & Parsons (1982, p. 359) state: “role plays in the classroom can help students overcome cultural ‘fatigue’, promoting the process

of cross-cultural dialog while at the same time providing opportunities for students to engage in oral communication". Littlewood (1981) classified role plays in the classroom as a way to get students to use language that they know to get meaning across as effectively as possible under social interaction activities since they require the learner to pay more attention to the establishment and maintenance of social relationships. I use role plays to accomplish these goals. First, following Donahue & Parsons idea, I use simple role plays (greetings and short exchanges, for example) in the classroom to put the students at ease and to introduce conversational patterns used by native speakers of English. I also use role plays in various situations to let students use what they have learned in recent lessons as a review and an opportunity to communicate. As a word of caution, it is important to point out that role plays are not always so very phatic in nature and, as Brazil (1995) describes, students may get little exposure to conversational processes in the classroom that could be of potential importance to them. We may need to consider if role plays are an authentic substitute for more real or natural conversation that occurs outside the classroom.

#### **Section 4: Role Playing and Key**

4.1 Hymes defines key as the tone, manner or spirit in which a speech act or event is performed. The teacher (as speaker) in a role play needs to be careful not to create 'false key' (my term) by assigning selective status to more words than the communicative needs of the situation require, and by adopting a mode of delivery which, under the circumstances, would be regarded as exceedingly laborious (Brazil, 1995). Brazil (1995) points out that such 'speech style' applied by some teachers may be helpful to beginners in the language but may prove detrimental to more advanced learners who may miss out on the more subtle intonational features of more natural conversation and thus slow down

progress towards communicative provenience. This may cause more fluent non-native speakers of English to have somewhat more profound and excessive prominences in their speech. This may also lead to the development of non-native speakers of English who are sometimes too formal or too blunt (McCarthy, 1991). I recommend the following to teachers to help alleviate these potential problems;

1. Keep communication simple. Do not complicate instructions, activities, suggestions and corrections.
2. If the students are having trouble comprehending, speak more slowly and/or select words they can easily understand.
3. Speak naturally without exaggerated intonation, formality or bluntness.

### **Section 5: Role Playing and Channels**

5.1 Channel refers to oral or written transmissions of speech (Hymes, 1982). Most of my role plays are acted out orally. However, visual aids, such as a real menu from an actual restaurant in America, are useful to stimulate both interest and more genuine communication among the participants.

### **Section 6: Role Playing and Message Content**

6.1 Message Content is usually under the total control of the teacher in terms of the development of discourse, the setting of agenda and the admittance of student contributions unlike that of informal conversation (Brazil, 1995). Hymes refers to 'topic and change of topic'. I often, in my 'controller' participant role, suggest that students role play a predetermined topic or decide for themselves a topic they would like to role play based on purpose. Role plays with predetermined topics can be more constrained if the topic is unfamiliar to the students. Teaching proper

ways to change the topic in conversation may also lead to more constrained dialog. Purpose-based role play can promote cross-cultural dialog, provide communication opportunities, allow students to use what they have learned and practice social ways of interaction. Topics can include; talking about Japan, asking about customs in foreign countries, inquiring about recent news (personal or impersonal) or conversational situations abroad.

## **Section 7: Role Playing and Message Form**

7.1 It is important for teachers to observe student response and exactly what kind of English language speakers they are developing or how speakers are actually speaking. McCarthy (1991) warns us, as I mentioned above, that non-native speakers of English tend to be overly formal or blunt in certain situations. In my role plays, I follow the procedure most closely explained by McDonough & Shaw (1993). That is, to divide the role play process into three parts. In the first, students are given the informational input and/or linguistic input (from texts or cassettes). In the second, students perform the role play. Lastly, the students receive feedback from the teacher (speaker/controller) who has made mental or written notes from the role play to be given as encouragement and suggestions for future conversations.

## **Section 8: My Experiences with Role Playing**

8.1 Relation of role play to other activities: I find that role play works well when used as an oral review of some previously learned material.

8.2 An example of a role play: The following is a display of one role play I use in my intermediate classes.

### 8.2.1 Timetable:

#### LOS ANGELES TO TOKYO

FLT.	DEPART	ARRIVE	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
61	1 : 00PM	4 : 20PM*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
63	10 : 00AM	1 : 20PM*						X	X
65	12 : 00PM	3 : 20PM*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

#### TOKYO TO LOS ANGELES

FLT.	DEPART	ARRIVE	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
62	5 : 20PM	11 : 10AM #	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
64	9 : 30PM	3 : 20PM #						X	X
66	4 : 25PM	10 : 15AM #	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

\*NEXT DAY # SAME DAY (Taken from the Japan Times)

8.2.2 Introduction & Purpose: Review simple present tense questions and answers (i.e.. What time does flight 61 to Tokyo leave?) and numbers while familiarizing students with authentic material.

8.2.3 Role play preparation: First, I tell the students what the role play topic is and then have them look at the timetable and pronounce the cities, flight numbers, the times and the days of the week.

8.2.4 Role play situation: Student A: Reserve a one-way ticket to Tokyo from Los Angeles for a Wednesday afternoon flight. You would prefer to have the latest flight available. Ask what time the flight arrives in Tokyo and/or how long the flight is, the price of the ticket and so forth. Begin the role play by saying "Excuse me..."

Student B: You are a ticket clerk. Offer your customer help and answer his/her questions appropriately. Ask the customer which flight he/she

would like and about seating preferences (window/aisle seat, smoking/non-smoking). \*only Student B has a copy of the timetable.

8.2.5 The role play presentation: Here is an oral extract of the situation above performed by a pair a students in my class.

A : Excuse me.

B : May I help you ?

A : Ah, I'd like to buy a ticket, leaving Wednesday afternoon.

B : We have two flights leaving noon and 1:00 p.m.. Which would you like ?

A : I like to, I take a flight leaving at 1 o'clock.

B : Do you have any request for the seat ?

A : Yes I'd like to have window side seat and in non-smoking section.

B : Okay, let me check the seat available.

A : How much does it cost... how much is the ticket and what time will it arrive in Tokyo ?

B : The ticket costs \$400 and it will arrive at 4:20 p.m.

A : Okay. I take one ticket, please.

B : Cash or card ?

A : Cash. Here you are.

B : Okay. Just a moment....

8.2.6 Feedback: Although the students were given a lot of guidance for the role play, I congratulated them on their relatively good performance. Then, I gave them some follow-up for future conversation, such as using the expressions "a one-way ticket" and "I'd like..." and "I'll take...", correcting pronunciation and intonation, reminding them to make more eye contact and pointing out to student A that she never waited for B to check to see if the seat was available, but simply rushed on to her next



question. For further review and practice, I checked to see if the students could reproduce the same situation and two similar ones (reserving a table at a restaurant on the telephone and buying movie tickets) and if they could internalize some of the suggestions gave them the following class. For the most part, they could but not without any guidance.

8.3 Student preferences: I have the most success with role plays that are semi-structured in nature, offering the students guidelines (clues) on what to say (i.e. "You would prefer to have the latest flight available.") without telling them exactly what to say. Students seem to prefer to be given some kind of assistance to not having any indication of what they are expected to produce. Perhaps it saves them the embarrassment of misunderstanding the teacher's instructions in front of the class. Nevertheless, highly structured role plays in which the students merely fill in the necessary information (i.e. "I'd like the \_\_\_\_\_ p.m. flight, please.") simply tend to be read and often fail to interest students and lack communicative spontaneity.

### **Section 9: Some Merits and Faults of Role Playing in the Classroom in Japan**

9.1 Merits: I see role plays as having three main advantages:

1. A chance for students to speak more freely and with little teacher interference.
2. Opportunities to simulate authentic conversation.
3. Help students overcome what Donahue & Parsons (1982) called cultural "fatigue".

9.2 I see role plays as having two main disadvantages;

1. Students sometimes overly rely on their teacher for clarification and assistance while performing the role play.
2. Not an authentic substitute for real (outside the classroom) conver-

sation.

9.3 Who can/should use role play?: Role plays can be used at any level, from beginner to advanced, and at various degrees of structure (from highly structured for beginners to very loosely structured for advanced students). Teachers who are working in the EFL situation and have a good understanding of the cultural and social makeup of the country in which they are teaching may find role plays especially useful to relieve student cultural “fatigue” by manipulating the role play to have its greatest effect.

### **Conclusion**

I have presented the distinguishing features of role plays, my experiences with role plays and some of the merits and faults of role plays. There are several ways to approach doing role plays in the classroom. I believe the seven headings included in this paper suggest appropriate guidelines for teachers when conducting role plays. Perhaps most importantly such guidelines-in keeping with the Communicative Approach offer teachers an opportunity to look closely at what is involved in EFL communication and in their own teaching. I feel that role plays have the greatest effect in providing students an opportunity to speak with the least amount of limitation while practicing a variety of language skills.

### **References**

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