

A Critical Role for Role-Playing Pedagogy

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This article draws from practitioners' experience and from scholarship in a variety of disciplines to construct a rationale for incorporating what we call "critical role-play" in the English-for-academic-purposes (EAP) classroom. We discuss the historical significance of role-play in TESOL and explore why this type of pedagogy has become less prominent in scholarship from recent decades. We argue for a new direction in role-play pedagogy that foregrounds critical thinking as essential to academic literacy. We describe several role-play activities that were successfully implemented in college-level EAP classes to demonstrate that academic role-play can be both cognitively challenging and linguistically relevant.

Cet article puise dans l'expérience de praticiens et dans des travaux d'érudition de diverses disciplines afin de justifier l'intégration de ce que nous appelons «le jeu de rôles critique» dans les cours d'anglais à des fins académiques. Nous discutons de la signification historique du jeu de rôle pour TESOL et explorons les raisons pour lesquelles ce type de pédagogie apparaît moins souvent dans les travaux d'érudition des dernières décennies. Nous militons pour une nouvelle direction dans la pédagogie reposant sur le jeu de rôles, une qui met au premier plan l'importance de la pensée critique dans la littérature académique. Afin de démontrer que le jeu de rôles académique peut constituer un défi cognitif tout en étant pertinent sur le plan linguistique, nous décrivons plusieurs activités de jeu de rôles qui ont bien réussi dans des cours collégiaux d'anglais à des fins académiques.

Fads of all kinds, particularly in education, are by nature short-lived. Most of us can probably cite a laundry list of TESOL activities and materials that were *de mode* for a short while, but then disappeared into cabinets, libraries, and methodology textbooks. Sometimes these vanished pedagogies reappear, often with new names, better packaging, and (one would hope) a more solid grounding in best practices. In this article, we hope to facilitate the reemergence of a particular pedagogy that has faded somewhat in TESOL, but has been taken up enthusiastically in many other disciplines: role-play. We argue that role-playing pedagogy with an explicit focus on cognitive engagement—what we call *critical role-play*—can be a valuable addition to the English for academic purposes (EAP) curriculum.

What is Role-Play?

Role-play has been notoriously difficult to define. The introduction in one manuscript on the topic cites the fable of the blind man and the elephant, explaining that role-play “takes on different meanings for different people” (Ladousse, 1987, p. 3).¹ Yes, it involves some kind of *role* and some sort of *play*, but this only raises additional questions: Are the roles actual, imitational, or completely fictional? Are they spontaneous or scripted? How structured and extensive is the play itself? Some define role-play so broadly as to claim that few practitioners do *not* use it in their classes (Ladousse). Certainly a number of the most common practices in communicative language-teaching involve some element of improvisation, simulation, or performance.² At some point, then, the distinction between role-play and any communicative language task can become blurred.

It is clear, however, that role-play has been widely used in TESOL, particularly in the early days of the communicative approach, when teachers were seeking how to move from pre-scripted dialogues to more improvisational (often student-generated) interactions (Paulston et al., 1975). The 1980s saw an increasingly diverse array of role-play activities, including more tailoring to ESP (particularly business English) and more awareness of cultural competence as an important factor in such interactions (Donahue & Parsons, 1982). By the mid-1980s, role-playing pedagogy had come to include everything from quick warm-up games to more extensive projects requiring weeks of preparation (Ladousse).

What led teachers to adopt this more dramatic approach to language instruction? (Al-Arishi, 1994). The earliest scholarship on role-play in TESOL emphasized its linguistic and affective benefits: role-play was shown to improve the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar structures and to promote spontaneous language use (Paulston et al., 1975; Scarcella, 1978). It was also touted as a means of increasing students’ motivation, engagement, and confidence (Ladousse, 1987). Several articles from the *TESL Canada Journal* advanced this scholarship by offering explicit guidelines for making role-plays more socially oriented and student-centered (Cumming, 1984; Larocque, 1986; Piper, 1984).

In the 1990s, strong criticisms of role-play began to emerge, prompting Al-Arishi (1994) to ask, “Is role-play gradually ‘losing its role’?” (p. 337). Al-Arishi claimed that role-play fared better in theory than in practice. Although it might seem to be the ideal “dress-rehearsal pedagogy,” he observed, role-play usually results in “surreal-play” rather than “real-play” (p. 339). This is in part because it is difficult to predict, much less simulate, the real world of every student. Furthermore, some students may not wish for the classroom simply to replicate the real world when they have the *real* real world for this. Hence Al-Arishi posited, “classroom-simulated realism may be in conflict with ... pedagogic reality” (p. 340), and role-play may not be well-suited to

students' "cognitive and intellectual aims" (p. 345). In this article, we provide a long-overdue counterargument to Al-Arishi's claim that role-play has lost its relevance and to build on the early scholarship outlining the benefits of role-play.

Al-Arishi's (1994) article seems to have marked a turning point in scholarship on role-play pedagogy. Since the 1990s, scholarly discussions of role-play in TESOL and applied linguistics have appeared less frequently. Questions about when, where, and why role-play might be appropriate seem to have been left behind. It may be, however, that our field is behind the times in this respect. In a number of other disciplines, in fact, role-play pedagogy has become increasingly prevalent.

Across the college curriculum, role-play is being used to facilitate a deeper and more critical understanding of course material. It has been used in humanities-focused disciplines such as history to help students "debate a complex, multi-layered historical scenario" (O'Brien & Spears, 2011, p. 59). In religion and philosophy, it "encourage[s] empathy towards other viewpoints" (Porter, 2008, p. 230). Faculty in political science have discovered that role-play simulations "have the power to recreate complex, dynamic political processes in the classroom, allowing students to examine the motivations, behavioural constraints, resources, and interactions among institutional actors" (Smith & Boyer, 1996, p. 690). A similar rationale underlies role-playing pedagogy in other social sciences such as psychology (Poorman, 2002), sociology (Simpson & Elias, 2011), and economics (Bernard & Yianniaka, 2010). Role-play is also used to facilitate understanding of difficult concepts in mathematics (Rosa & Lerman, 2011), chemistry (Grafton, 2011), and other natural sciences.³ In professional fields such as nursing, role-play makes students to think more deeply about the needs and experiences of patients (Jenkins & Turick-Gibson, 1999).

This is just a sampling of the growing body of scholarship about the cognitive benefits of role-play. However, few publications have explored these benefits with adult language-learners, particularly in an EAP setting. One of the few recent studies on role-play and second-language-learning focused on adult immigrant learners in a Greek-language class. The literature review in the article explained that role-play helps students "communicate, express their feelings, enrich their vocabulary and appraise their existing knowledge" (Magos & Politi, 2008, p. 101). It also emphasizes that role-play offers a more pleasant language-learning experience, creating a "safe environment where learners are relaxed, creative and inventive" (pp. 101-102). All these are valid reasons for using role-play in this particular context, but they may not be sufficient to persuade teachers of EAP.

Why has role-play been largely overlooked in EAP? One answer may be that many teachers have not resolved the tension between surreal and real play. Role-play as critical thinking does not fit easily into either of these cat-

egories. We would argue, however, that this is precisely why role-play holds such potential for EAP: it resides in the middle ground between creative thought and real-world interaction. As such, it can help teachers address one of the most persistent challenges in academic English classrooms, that of sustaining *cognitive challenge* while still creating the conditions for improved *linguistic competence* (Pally, 1997). Hence the primary rationale for using role-play in EAP should not be simply that it is “fun” or “safe,” but rather that it is both intellectually and linguistically challenging.

What is needed is a “critical turn” (or perhaps a “critical *thinking* turn”) in role-play pedagogy. Role-play can be used to help students engage critically with course material, taking into account “deep meanings, personal implications, and social consequences” (Shor, 1992, p. 169). Critical role-play requires students to embody voices and perspectives that may be quite different from their own. It asks them to speak and write using discourse that may be unfamiliar. It encourages them to explore relationships among people, texts, and contexts. Critical role-play, therefore, is both cognitively *and* linguistically challenging.

Critical role-play is rare, although not completely absent in TESOL scholarship. Role-play has been used to cultivate college students’ understanding of poverty and homelessness in the United States in preparation for service learning (Heuser, 1999). It has also been used with high school students in South Africa as part of a repertoire of activities for “multimodal exploration of texts” (Bhattacharya et al., 2007, p. 482; Stein, 1998). Although these examples offer insights into the types of themes that might be engaged through critical role-play, they do not offer much guidance to practitioners who wish to implement this pedagogy in their own contexts. To this end, we have developed the following heuristic of questions designed to guide EAP practitioners seeking to address both cognitive and linguistic objectives through critical role-play.

Cognitively Challenging

1. Is the topic of the role-play intellectually rigorous and relevant to participants?
2. Does the role-play require participants to employ any higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and metacognition?
3. Are participants required to research their roles, as opposed to merely inventing them?
4. Does the role-play bring forth divergent perspectives?
5. Does the role-play encourage participants to draw intertextual relationships?

Linguistically Relevant

6. Does the role-play complement the linguistic goals of the curriculum?
7. Is there an information gap? That is, does each participant hold a different piece of information needed to complete the task?
8. Does preparation for or performance of the role-play lead to greater linguistic, discourse, strategic, or sociolinguistic competence?

9. Does the role-play encourage participants to adopt greater versatility in lexicon, register, or syntax?
10. Are participants using multiple language modalities speaking, listening, reading, and writing to prepare and perform the role-play?

In the following section, we offer first-hand accounts to explain how we have incorporated critical role-play into our own EAP courses. We showcase several role-play tasks and discuss how they reflect our criteria for critical role-play. Throughout this discussion, we draw explicit references to the numbered questions in the above heuristic, citing the numbers in parentheses.

The Legal Trial (Author 2)

I implemented a legal trial role-play in an EAP oral communication course at a private graduate school in the US. My 15 international students from Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea were all matriculated in a master's degree program in international policy studies or international business. To be admitted, they had to have attained at minimum an (Internet-based) TOEFL score of 79.

This eight-week oral communication course is the first of two credit-bearing oral courses offered in the EAP program. Under the umbrella goals of building linguistic and sociolinguistic competence, the specific course objectives required that students successfully employ strategies for participating in academic discussions and analyzing and developing oral arguments. The legal trial complemented these aims by helping learners to attain greater proficiency in English and hone their oral argumentation skills (6).

The legal case centered on whether all tobacco advertisements should be banned in the US. Each student received a synopsis of the case and was assigned a role in the trial as an expert witness or an attorney. With four witnesses and three or four attorneys on each team, learners worked primarily outside class in dyads (as an attorney-witness pair) to research their roles and prepare their arguments (3). Students sought assistance from other members of their team to deconstruct arguments from texts; this produced a lively discussion as they grappled with understanding and synthesizing the research material (2, 4). By design, the legal trial resembled the type of intellectually challenging tasks that lead to the most language production, negotiation for meaning, and modified output (1, 7, 8).

As part of their preparation for their graded performance, students employed information literacy skills learned in class such as evaluating the credibility of sources from which they gained information and assessing the relevance of facts to their disciplinary expertise in the trial. Preparation encouraged students to read texts with a purpose, that of supporting or refuting particular arguments (5, 10).

In addition to the students' work to prepare for the trial outside class, I allocated three class sessions (six hours) for students to do the following:

(a) analyze argumentation strategies from US legal dramas; (b) perform extemporaneous trials; and (c) discuss the evidence they had researched in support of their proposition with other members of their team. To scaffold the speaking tasks, students were asked to record legal jargon and analyze argumentation strategies from *Law and Order*, the US television drama. They had to explore the difference between leading and non-leading questions, evaluate the persuasiveness of oral arguments, and critique the credibility of evidence (2). Students also performed extemporaneous trials for which they received peer and teacher feedback. They were asked to describe the challenges they faced in constructing an oral argument and to compare what made certain arguments more convincing than others (2). I provided feedback on the persuasiveness of their oral arguments in the US justice system and suggested terminology that they could use in their court proceedings (8, 9).

On the day of the trial, one attorney from each side delivered the opening and closing arguments, and each attorney questioned one witness from their team and cross-examined one witness from the opposing team. A four-minute time limit was established for each round, so all participants had to economize their language production. Students performed remarkably well in their roles, supporting their arguments with key research and delivering them with conviction. All seven students from fall 2010 who responded to an anonymous questionnaire reported that the legal trial was a worthwhile educational activity. Five students reported that it had improved their critical thinking skills "a lot," and two reported that it had improved their critical thinking skills "a considerable amount."

Students' feedback suggested that the legal trial successfully met linguistic and cognitive goals, but it may have been less successful in meeting some students' affective preferences. Two students reported that this trial was less appealing than the child custody case used for a practice trial in class. It may, therefore, be prudent in future role-plays to conduct a needs assessment of students' preferences before assigning a trial topic. Other suggestions pointed to the need for more extensive preparation time, better balance in research demands, and greater opportunity for witnesses to participate in the performative aspect of the trial.

Overall, the legal trial offered students ample opportunity to hone their English and argumentation skills. They researched information pertinent to the case (at times from legal or specialized texts) (3), discussed and synthesized the information they found (2, 5), evaluated its relevance (2), anticipated their opponents' arguments in order to refute them (4), and delivered a convincing oral argument that required the use of sophisticated language and legal jargon (9, 10). Because this was a cognitively demanding task, it produced a high level of intellectual engagement among students (1).

Scholarly Dialogues (Author 1)

I have implemented a role-play activity called *scholarly dialogue* as a pre-writing assignment in several undergraduate academic writing courses, which include both L1 and L2 writers. In a scholarly dialogue, students are asked to embody the authors they have been reading and to explore the connections among texts and ideas (2, 5). This helps to facilitate critical reading so that students can more effectively synthesize, critique, or apply these texts in their argumentative writing. Writing these dialogues also encourages them to experiment with academic voice and register, because they are writing not as themselves, but as published scholars (8, 9). Although writing is the primary focus of the scholarly dialogue, this writing must be scaffolded with reading, discussion, and group role-play activities.

The first scholarly dialogue that I implemented was for a unit centered on the question *What is bias?* Students read articles by John Berger, an art critic who wrote *Ways of Seeing*; and Alan Gross, a rhetorician who analyzes scientific writing. Approximately two hours of class time were spent discussing the readings. As a class, we outlined the key concepts and arguments of each author and then applied their work as a lens to look at additional texts and images. In the third hour, the role-play assignment was introduced: to write a two-page (imagined) dialogue or e-mail exchange between the two authors (3, 4). To help generate topics, students engaged in a short oral role-play, with half of the class voicing the perspective of Gross and half that of Berger (10). This quickly turned into a debate about the nature of rhetoric in the arts versus in the natural sciences. At the end of class, I summarized the themes that had emerged during the discussion and highlighted some potential entry points for the students' written dialogues (1, 2, 4).

The scholarly dialogues that students produced were both playful and provocative. One student put Gross and Berger into conversation about a work of art, considering the artist's intent versus the viewers' interpretation. Another had them talk about the market for diet products and how advertisers use both pseudo-science and visual rhetoric to appeal to consumers. Many students experimented with tone, genre, voice, and style, often imitating academic discourse with impressive accuracy and a hint of parody (5, 8, 9). In other words, as they pretended to be published scholars, my students began to write with more academic authority, which was one of the primary goals of our course (6). Students incorporated this understanding and authorial voice into their next assignment: a critical analysis of a text or image from the theoretical perspective of Gross or Berger (2, 5, 6, 8). The role-play strengthened their analytical writing by giving them a more accurate and in-depth understanding of each author's perspective.

In another writing class, which was linked to a course in environmental anthropology, students were asked to write a research paper on an environmental question of their choosing such as, "Is eco-tourism an effective

method of environmental protection in Costa Rica?" or "Should environmental activists in India continue to protest against the Narmada dam initiative?" To encourage students to synthesize information rather than simply summarize individual sources, I incorporated role-play as a pre-writing assignment (2, 4). After they had spent two weeks conducting library research, the students were asked to write an imagined round-table conversation at which scholars, activists, and community members discussed their perspectives on the research question (5, 8, 10).

When evaluating students' work, I was impressed with how many of their "characters" engaged interactively by asking questions and raising counter-arguments. Some students did struggle with the assignment, however. One realized in the process of writing it that she lacked sufficient information to represent all perspectives and therefore needed to conduct additional research. A few others spent more time making the dialogues comical rather than producing content-rich material. In my feedback to students, I highlighted sections of their dialogues that were particularly well crafted and offered suggestions for how this material might be incorporated into the final paper. A week later, when students submitted the first draft of the formal research paper, we discussed whether the role-play had been a helpful pre-writing task. Most students said Yes. As with my earlier class, students reported seeing more connections among authors and ideas, and this helped them structure their research papers.

Overall, I have seen significant cognitive and linguistic benefits to critical role-play in my writing courses. Assessment of these tasks, however, is still a challenge. It can be difficult to convey explicit expectations for writing that is by its nature exploratory and unpredictable. When one is grading these assignments, the writing process must be taken into consideration along with the product. Students who are more experienced with creative writing will most probably produce more engaging dialogues. However, if a student shows an in-depth and critical understanding of each author's position, I consider this a successful scholarly dialogue regardless of whether the writing has dramatic flair. Providing models of effective (and sometimes less effective) role-plays has helped in subsequent classes to convey expectations and generate more creative possibilities for students.

Conclusion

In all these role-play activities, students were expected to think both creatively and critically. They had to analyze content and synthesize innovatively. Completing these tasks also required a thorough understanding of challenging course material and a mastery of linguistic and cognitive skills. The spoken and written work that emerged as a result embodied a variety of voices and arguments. These activities demonstrate that role-play can become both real and surreal play: students must consider what authentic lan-

guage use is, but they also have some room for experimentation. We would argue that this space between practice and play is fertile ground for cognitive and linguistic growth.

Critical role-play is not without its challenges, however. Like any task-based activity, critical role-play takes time to implement in class. However, when the pre-task activities are scaffolded carefully so that the preparation for the role-play meets the cognitive and linguistic aims of the course, time is not sacrificed from other pedagogical priorities. This scaffolding is particularly relevant for learners at lower proficiency levels. With these students, instructors may find it helpful to use more scripted role-plays, pre-teach vocabulary and specialized jargon, and reduce the research demands on students by selecting the articles needed to carry out the critical role-play. Instructors should also facilitate a discussion about the content so that learners clearly understand the material before they are asked to apply it to the critical role-play task.

In sum, we argue that critical role-play is one of a repertoire of activities in the EAP classroom that can sustain intellectual engagement, promote higher-order thinking skills, and facilitate language acquisition. We believe that critiques such as Al-Arishi's (1994) do not acknowledge the full potential of role-play pedagogy. For no matter what students' real world may be in the future, we can safely assume that critical thinking skills will play an important role; it is in this capacity that a carefully designed role-play can prepare our students to succeed. Like any pedagogy, role-play can indeed be used uncritically, and the focus can shift easily from learning to entertainment. This, we believe, should not be a cause for rejection, but for reformation. Perhaps by turning to our colleagues in TESOL and other disciplines we can tap into all the benefits linguistic, affective, and cognitive that critical role-play has to offer. We have little doubt that other educators are incorporating role-play in additional and innovative ways, and we hope that they will share their experiences as part of a larger dialogue about incorporating creative, challenging activities in the EAP classroom.

Notes

¹ Introduction written by Alan Maley.

² Although a few practitioners have attempted to articulate a distinction between day-to-day role-play activities and more extensive simulations (Ladousse, 1987; Bartle, 2010), many use the terms *role-play* and *simulation* interchangeably (Tompkins, 1998).

³ See McSharry and Jones, 2000, for an excellent review of role-playing pedagogy in science education.

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