Putting Reality into Role Play

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Role-plays, simulations, and improvisations are all teaching techniques which are often subsumed under the single term *role-play*. Role-play and simulation are generally considered to involve the assumption of fictitious roles while improvisation requires only a fictitious situation. It is argued in this article that fictitious roles and situations, particularly if too far removed from the students' experience, contribute to the failure of these activities. An alternative view of role-taking is offered together with eight principles to guide teachers in their selection and adaptation of role-play materials.

A currently popular teaching technique in the ESL teacher's repertoire is role-playing, but there is little consensus about the precise definition of role play. The term is used by most teachers to refer to a variety of activities ranging from the two or three improvised lines they use to extend a prepared dialogue to the rather more elaborate simulations such as those created and advocated by Ken Jones (1982). In general, materials writers distinguish among the terms as follows:

Role-plays "are exercises where the student has been assigned a fictitious role from which he has to improvise some kind of behaviour towards the other role characters in the exercise... In some role-plays...the student may simply be assigned the role of playing himself, but then you have a simulated situation rather than real role-play. The two basic requirements for role-play...are improvisation and fictitious roles" (Paulston, 1977, p. 32).

Improvisation "is a dramatic hypothetical situation in which two speakers interact without any special preparation" (Dobson, 1974, p. 41). Although Dobson makes no direct reference to the identity of the participants, in all of the 50 situations which she subsequently lists, students are allowed to be themselves. In this respect, Dobson's use of the term improvisation is consistent with Paulston's (above).

Simulation involves fictional roles and improvised situations, but differs from both primarily in the amount of complexity involved. Ken Jones (1982) offers a succinct if not overly informative definition of simulation as "reality of function in a simulated and structured environ-

ment" (p. 5). He goes on to say that this definition "stresses the reality of the activity and contrasts it with the simulated world outside, and the reference to structure is a guide to distinguishing between simulation and role play" (p. 5). Apparently, the amount or complexity of structure is what sets simulation apart from role play. While both involve fictitious roles, there is less room for improvisation in simulations just because the situations are so highly structured.

Even though the definitions offer some clues as to the differences among the three techniques, in practice, the boundaries are less distinct. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Jone's insistence that simulation differs fundamentally from role play is based on a questionable premise and one which is likely not to be apparent to the ESL learner (Piper, in press). Other materials writers muddy the distinction as well. The improvisational activities following Hine's *Skits,* (1980) for example, include both fictitious roles and situations allowing students to portray themselves (see p. 15 and p. 27) although, technically, improvisations do not require participants to assume new identities. This lack of clarity on the part of textbook writers no doubt contributes to the tendency of ESL teachers to lump together the various activities as "role-play." Conversely, strict adherence to the definitions given above, particularly of role play, explains in part why such activities so often fail.

Many ESL teachers have had the experience of preparing students very thoroughly for a role play activity and then having that activity fail miserably. One such failure, which D. Piper and I have described in another article (Piper & Piper, 1983), involved an improvisation suggested by Hines as a follow-up to one of her skits. In this instance, an ESL teacher prepared her secondary school ESL class and directed them through a presentation of "Whose Party?" (Hines, 1980, pp. 17-19). The students responded favourably to the assignment even though the plot, which involved parents' coming home early from a vacation and finding their teenaged children hosting an unauthorized party, was somewhat alien to their experience. The improvisation which followed the skit was not successful.

Students, in pairs, were instructed to improvise the conversation between two of the guests on their way home from the party. The primary goal of the improvisation was to stimulate free and creative use of the language, but despite the fact that the situation and some appropriate responses to it had been anticipated in the skit, most pairs of students reacted awkwardly and some in embarrassed silence. Certainly, there was little of the free use of English hoped for by Hines and the puzzled teacher.

What caused the failure just described, and countless others, no doubt, was not any lack of preparation or commitment on the part of the

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students. Rather, the failure occurred because the situation and the characters were far too removed from the ESL students' worlds, from their *reality*. Taylor (1982), in discussing such failures, observed that "students do not appear to be as likely to engage not only their language but their whole selves as fully in contrived simulations, which are essentially uncompelling, as they are when they have a stake in the outcome of their endeavours" (p. 237). In other words, the assumptions of safety and absence of self-consciousness inherent in the use of a fictitious persona, may be false if the students' experience does not permit some degree of sympathy, if not identity, with the assumed *persona*.

In our attempts to release students' creativity in language by permitting them to wear the mask of another person, we sometimes actually inhibit that creativity precisely because that other identity and the situations which may be appropriate to it are alien to the students' experience and their needs. While role play, improvisation, and simulations are valuable instructional techniques, they are just as likely to fail as to succeed as long as we insist that their "roles" be fictitious and, very probably, foreign to their experience.

ALTERNATIVES

The alternative to a role play, improvisational or simulation activity which results in awkward silence is one which results in the creative and novel use of previously learned vocabulary and structure, i.e., one which results in communicative language use. Achieving a more positive outcome does not involve radical measures. It does not involve strict adherence to a rigid redefinition of any of the associated terms. On the contrary, it entails paying *less* attention to the distinctions which, as we have seen, are frequently murky anyway. Specifically, greater success in using these techniques will occur if we exploit the fact that role playing and pretence are part of everyday living. As children we actually pretend, physically, to be someone else and as adults we assume different roles daily in our interactions with family, friends, colleagues and strangers. This normal behaviour can be exploited in teaching "if classroom role play stresses the communicative interaction of individuals acting on their own behalf and without the assumption of *personae* superimposed by the teacher" (Piper & Piper, 1983, p. 84), or in other words, if we let students assume roles within their own identities.

I would like to suggest a set of guidelines for selecting and adapting role play, improvisational and simulation activities. These guidelines are based on common sense and upon certain doubts about the validity of the

assumptions underlying role play, as it has traditionally been defined, particularly for adult learners, adolescents and beginners of any age. (See Taylor, 1982 & D. Piper, 1983 for a full discussion of these assumptions and related problems.)

Guidelines

1. In general, adult and adolescent learners and most beginners will be more comfortable playing roles which are within their range of experience or, at least, potentially so.

2. The *situation* should dictate the role. If the situation in which the role taker finds himself is alien to his experience, he will have little upon which to base his creation of the role. A student who has earned his living for 20 years as a welder, for example, may never have been in the situation of trying to decide how many or which clothes to take on his Mediterranean cruise, and may not be comfortable in or even see the purpose of being put into the role of someone with such decisions to make.

3. Be sure that *all* participants have adequate background to function in the improvised situations. Some activities, such as the improvisations following Hines' *Skits* and those associated with Akiyama's *Functional Dialogues,* have the necessary background built in. Others do not. Dobson, for example, suggests the following situation for improvisation:

> You go to the bank to withdraw some money from your account. When the cashier asks for your identification, you discover that you have left all identification at home. (Dobson, 1974, p. 43)

While the customer's role is well-defined and accessible to most ESL students, the teller's role is not. Many ESL students will have little knowledge of Canadian banking policies which will govern the teller's responses. Unless the teacher assumes the teller's role or, preferably, prepares the class by providing the necessary background information, the improvisation is likely to fail.

4. For beginners, the activity must be short. One or two exchanges will be adequate and, should the task be too demanding or otherwise unsuitable for the student, it will get him "off the hook" quickly.

5. Teachers should get to know their students well before attempting role play activities. Knowing the students' backgrounds, interests, and needs will help teachers to select appropriate situations and roles which maximize the potential for success.

6. In particular, teachers should keep in mind the cultural experience of their students since many of the role plays found in ESL texts are highly culture-bound. A situation demanding that participants complain to their teacher about some aspect of instruction might be less than successful with Japanese students, for example, in whom has been inculcated a strong sense of respect for teachers.

7. Teachers should participate often in the simulated simulations. By doing so, not only will they increase their awareness of the role-taking process, but will give their students the opportunity to observe, first hand, the shifts in language function and register which are necessary with different roles and in different situations.

8. Do not follow these or any other guidelines too slavishly. Sometimes a bit of fantasy is just the thing. Only one or two in 14 million of us will ever win a major lottery prize; still it is nice to pretend. And sometimes it *is* fun to hide in a false identity. More importantly, growth as individuals demands that we expand and deepen our understanding of others. Assuming the identities and situations of other people, even those whom we have met only briefly in a dialogue, is one way of effecting such growth.

CONCLUSION

In the development of comprehension, oral fluency, and especially, communicative competence, the techniques of role play, improvisation, and simulation are valuable resources for the ESL teacher. I have suggested here that the too frequent failure of these techniques in practice can be blamed on the traditional belief that role play, simulation and, in some cases, improvisation, necessarily involve the assumption of a fictitious *personae.* I have argued, instead, that by extending the notion of role taking to include the kind of role-shifts which characterize everyday life, we are more likely to encourage rather than to restrict the creative exchange of language which is the primary objective of our teaching.

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