

Using Role Play in the Business English Communication Classroom at a Private College in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract: *This paper studies the use of role play in the Business English communication classroom at the tertiary level specifically for Diploma students. This research further elaborates on how role play can be utilized to enhance and maximize students' participation in the Business English communication classroom exploring more on the productive skills specifically the speaking component. Role plays are extremely rich in content, skills, creativity and could provide the learner with the opportunity to fully utilize schemata and train specific communication skills as well as promote a good cooperative teamwork in the Business English communication classroom. This qualitative research incorporates a case study as a method of the research paper. This research uses observation and interview as a method of data collection for a duration of three months in a studying semester. Students are supposed to choose any cases related to business communication and perform a role play in the classroom as a tool of their ongoing assessment in the semester. The results in the research are obtained through observation and interview. The findings of the research are this would benefit academicians in incorporating role play as a tool in enhancing the communication skills in the classroom. The role play task has really shown a promising result in the effort to produce well equipped and well-rounded graduates who are ready to meet the real-life scenarios in the future.*

Keywords: Role Play, Business English, Communication, Classroom, Private College

1. Introduction

Communication is a tool utilized in the classrooms to promote the productive skills especially the speaking component. Business English cannot be taught without motivating students to speak as well as creating a platform for them to practice speaking in the classroom. There are plenty of ways of teaching communication in a Business English classroom. The various ways range from the use of role play, case study, critical thinking, and problem-based learning. One of the ways that has been identified by the researcher to encourage students to speak confidently in a Business English classroom is role play based on the cone of learning. Role-playing is a teaching strategy that compliments and promotes the effectiveness of communication in the classroom. These teaching technique highlights the norm of learning and incorporates the cooperative behavior to enhance students both socially and intellectually to work on their tasks together in the classroom.

The term role play is not new however, undergraduates were not given enough opportunity to role play in a Business English classroom due to limited time and resources. Common words such as role play, simulation, drama, and language games are often used in a classroom. All these strategies demonstrate different notions to promote the productive skills of speaking and writing. Some students think that the difference between role play, and simulation is in the reality of the roles played by students according to the scenario given or created by their instructors in the classroom. Simulation is conducted in a manner where the students play an authentic role, e.g., a role in real life scenario based on their daily activities or tasks (e.g., dealing with a lecturer in the classroom or doing a payment at the finance department). In a role play, the students get the opportunity to play a role that they don't get to demonstrate in real life (e.g., the role of a business personnel in a Multinational Company or a business tycoon).

Based on previous study, Hidayati, and Pardjono (2018) students perceived role play as one of the tool or elements in a simulation. Hence, in a role play, lecturers assign specific roles for students to act out within the scenario given or created for them. Simulation focuses more on the interaction of one role with the other roles, instead of acting out individual roles. In this paper, the researcher intended to share the understanding of teaching Business English with a role play to identify a teaching strategy in which students are encouraged to deal with the given familiar or non-familiar roles. Students are asked and to interact with the other role characters within the sociocultural context and situation given.

Research Problem

Business English classroom can be a challenging environment for an effective speaking task because it focuses more on the content based and less emphasis given on the speaking component. Most of the time productive skill such as speaking is hardly being utilized in the classroom. The common code of lesson conducted in a Business English classroom is always limited within lectures and tutorials (Rashid & Qaisar, 2017). Hence, students can be lack of confidence when asked to answer a question orally or present a topic individually in the classroom. Lack of confidence in speaking leads to the gap whereby graduates are unable to utilize their interpersonal communication during a job interview or at their first job. The lack of confidence to speak in the public de-motivates students and finally they fail to obtain a suitable job due to their weak interpersonal communication skill. (Zaidi, Rani, & Rahman, 2017).

Research Aim

There was an important need to utilize the use of role play in the business English classroom to help students towards learning to speak in the public with more confidence especially when they start their next journey after the college.

Research Objective

The main objective of the study is to ensure effective teaching & learning takes place in the Business English classroom with active participation from the students and constructive feedback from the lecturers.

Research Question

This study looks at the question namely.

- 1) What is the perception of using role play in the speaking tasks in Business English classroom?

- 2) What are the possible difficulties and challenges that might occur while adopting this strategy?

Significance of the study

This study will serve the interest of the lecturers especially those who constantly face problems getting students to speak in the business English lesson in the class. Prior to that, the researcher believes that the findings obtained through the study will help to answer the question about the use of role play in helping students to speak confidently. If the results show a positive output, the researcher will share the findings with other lecturers, in the hope that it will help them to improve on their teaching skills especially when it comes to the most challenging skills - speaking task. Role play in the business English classroom will be a win-win situation where lecturers do not need feel the fear for having to spend much of their precious and limited time in evaluating students' speaking task or having the lack of confidence in teaching speaking in class since this is a least utilized task among the students in the college.

The researcher believes that if students were exposed to role play in the classroom, sooner or later, they will be able to speak better and confidently without the assistance from the lecturer or fellow classmates. The report of this research might be published in academic journals to enable more academicians to get access to it and aid them in teaching speaking skills in their respective classroom. Apart from that, the needs of the business English students will be concerned through identifying their reactions towards the use role play as an ongoing assessment in the classroom. The findings will further contribute to improving the students' reactions towards the use of role play in speaking assessments.

Lastly, through this study researcher also hopes to share the findings and contribute towards further improvement in the effort to develop students' English language speaking ability. The research can also benefit several parties, namely the policy maker, authorities, and the students. May be the findings can further affect the college to re-evaluate the syllabus in fulfilling the ESL speaking needs of the undergraduate students in the college.

2. Literature Review

This paper reflects and brings pedagogical approach in overcoming students' inability to speak well with confidence in the classroom. According to MacDonald, (2012) and Kaovere & Mbaukua, (2018) role playing in the classroom may allow the students to practice the speaking skills in a coached and mentored way to learn the gist of speaking in the public without fear. It will help to boost the confidence to speak in English in the real-world scenario. In this case study, role playing activities has been incorporated in the Business English classroom to aid undergraduate college students to understand the communication processes. However, Zaidi et al, (2017) argue that role playing in the Business English classroom could be time consuming and may not achieve full students' participation. Students must be given opportunity to practice their free will with the direction in which the roles will evolve Yen, Hou & Chang, (2015).

Research has demonstrated a compilation of a summary of many studies pointed out that most of it indicated that self-esteem is the result rather than the cause of academic achievement Russell & Shepherd (2010). Therefore, it is essential to ensure students utilize the speaking task in relation to role play in the classroom. In addition, Dr Martin Covington 1992 from the University of California carried out an extensive review of the research on the relationship between self-esteem and achievement. Dr. Martin concluded that "self-esteem can be improvised through direct instruction and that such instruction can lead to better achievement

gains”. Self-esteem can be achieved through ample of speaking practice in the class. This notion is in par with the experience of the researcher, who has conducted two research projects in the area of self-esteem, and the findings have led her to conclude that self-esteem can be transformed and utilized in the classroom Apart from that, significant gains can also be observed in the area of communication and is considered to be of the importance in the classroom: as teachers we can exert an influence both on the performance and well-being of our students. Sadaat, Ghasemzadeh & Soleimani (2012)



Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Role play is a teaching strategy based on the experiential learning theory which has four-stage process that describes on how students acquire and embed new knowledge. The theory includes the idea that students are able to change because of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. Many education theorists, such as Dewey, Lindeman and Kolb, write about the importance of experiential learning. Cranton (2016) states that “these two concepts – learning by experience and reflection – remain as the integral elements of all modern-day descriptions of adult education” (p. 9).

Role-play is a main example of an experiential learning technique that can be employed as an essential tool to improve learning among adult students. Students are assigned to the roles in a real-world scenario. As a process of learning they must apply and develop the actual skills required to handle the situation or solve the problem presented in the role play task. It is believed that students are able to gain more than in a traditional learning situation (Russell & Shepherd, 2010). Students pick on assigned roles and act out those roles through a scripted play. The role play can be conducted one-to-one (individual role play) or as a group role play with each member in the group taking on a role/character. Role-play pedagogy has been shown to be effective in achieving learning outcomes in the three major learning domains: affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Maier, 2002; Rao & Stupans, 2012). By encouraging students to take on a role, they practice empathy and perspective taking.

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative research using the case study approach was carried out in this research. This particular research method was selected because it involves an observation in a single instance or event; a case/ situation. It provides a systematic way of observing events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results. As a researcher, the research method would help to gain a sharpened understanding of why the instance happened as it did and to look at more extensively in the future research. It can also be defined as a research strategy, an

empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life scenario. It involves single and multiple case studies, which includes quantitative evidence, relies on multiple sources of evidence and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions.

The research was conducted in a Business English classroom which comprises undergraduates in the field of e-commerce in a private college in Kuala Lumpur. The class is a mixed ability class with a total amount of 15 students who responded to interview questions at the end of their semester week 14. This research, which is based on classroom environment context, was carried out during the Business English lesson period in the class. It was assumed that these targeted students were capable of revealing their attitudes and feelings toward learning speaking through the use of role play.

Observations and interviews were conducted with all the students and their role plays were recorded. In order to carry out the instruments, a mobile phone was used to record the role play of the students, a set of questions were prepared for the interview sessions to obtain their perceptions and reactions toward the method used to enhance speaking in the Business English classroom and a journal to jot down on the spot notes about the observations. Students' consents were obtained before conducting the research.

Observation

The research was carried out over a three months period in September - December 2021. The researcher had at least one role play task with students. Hence, the researcher used the 8th week of the semester to evaluate the role play of the students as part of their formative assessment. The role play was conducted in a two hours (2) class. (Approximately 15-20 minutes per group). Each group comprises of 5 students of mix ability.

Over the three - month period, observations were made only in the classroom where the role play activities took place every two weeks. The class was observed on two occasions with the teacher concerned conducting Business English lesson using the conventional way of conducting mass lecture which delivers all the theoretical aspects of the subject concerned and the second way using role play as a classroom practice. Role play included guided materials, which had case study and sample of videos from you tube about communication in the work place.

Interviews

The interview session was conducted in week 8 after the completion of formative assessment. The participants told the researcher that the guidelines given prior to the lesson helped them and they were also inspired by the use of role play in the classroom and videos of communication in the workplace shown in the class especially as guidance. On top of that, the participants claimed that the guide provided was useful and assisted them to speak better with higher level of confidence. When requested to compare both methods; the conventional way of teaching and the use of role play in Business English class participants indicated that they prefer and like role play to be continued in teaching English in the future. They also feel that added materials like , videos, movies and Ted Talks would help students to further speak better.

3. Findings and Discussions

Based on the observation the researcher found that the solution lies in types of activities and teaching materials used to make students feel comfortable. While role playing, researcher observed that students were comfortable with the use of role play. When students are at their

comfort zone as stated by Vgotsky the zone of proximal development (ZPD) they are willing to contribute brilliant ideas and speak in confidence among their peers. Participants were able to convey their ideas, integrate their creativity and boost their talent in the task given. Researcher also observed that there was a good team spirit fostered among all the members despite aspects of different socio culture and field of study.

Researcher identified that the students were keen on peer teaching and editing among their group members. The students corrected the pronunciation and intonation of other students who were slightly weak. Researcher also observed that there were teaching and learning process that took place in a very conducive and interactive manner among the students while they were getting ready to role-play. While role playing all the students contributed their best based on all the criteria that they were taught in the classroom.

In the interview the interviewees stated that they gained more self - confidence and self-esteem in order to speak deliberately in the public without fail. Plenty of knowledge and information shared and delivered throughout the process of role playing. The students mentioned that they fully participated and engaged in all the effort to make the role play a successful effort. Likewise, the saying goes "*Pratice makes perfect*". The participants claimed that on the first day they were given this task they had lack of confidence and talent in communicating. Through a thorough practice the students were more bold and active in communicating. The students claimed that they managed to break the barrier and be more outspoken and in fact they outperformed during presentation.

According to the participants their schemata that they gained during their first week indeed helped them to perform better with the aid of the Business English communication module. The students' claimed that their communication ability has reached a satisfactory level now whereby they are above intermediate level in communicating. Their proficiency level has improved drastically. It can be concluded that the role play task has really shown a fruitful results in order to produce well equipped and well-rounded graduates who are ready to meet the obstacles in the working environment.

Limitation

As with any teaching conducted in a conventional classroom, there are challenges to use role play in the classroom. Due to time constraint, only small number of students was used and the duration was only for one semester. In order to obtain a depth insight of this study in the next study, researcher could use quantitative method to obtain the findings of the study. In short; autonomy cannot be thrust upon either students or lecturers: they need to be supported towards independence. The role play processes, supported by the technology available, are crucial in determining the success

Recommendation

The challenges in conducting role play in the classroom is real however, it can be solved with proper planning, preparation and execution. Role play is indeed time consuming it is because lack of sufficient personnel and there are potential for misjudging the zone of proximal development; success hinges on identifying the area that is just beyond but not too far beyond students' abilities. Inadequately modeling the desired behaviors, strategies or activities can be tailored, designed and considered for the individual student's needs, predilections, interests, and abilities such by demonstrating to students how to role play.

Conclusion

In conclusion the purpose of this research is to enhance speaking in Business English classroom through the use of role play. In relation to the immediate aim in working with role play method are shown to lecturers that their students can indeed be motivated to enjoy their Business English classes given adequate input and a clear goal is defined. Hence, while assessing the importance of role play, it is vital to look at the context in which the lecturers wishes to utilize the strategies and techniques. Lecturers, must know the learners and evaluate their particular needs beforehand. This study shows that role play allows possible early identifier of giftedness and provides individualized instruction for intervention. Role play in a Business English classroom provides a greater assurance of the learner acquiring the desired skill, knowledge or ability and provides differentiated instruction. This strategy benefits learners as it involves the learner, encourages the learner to learn and minimizes the level of stress for the learner. However, undertaking this study highlighted some of the barriers that hinders role play to be utilised greatly in the Malaysian tertiary education today. Many of these downsides are systemic and cannot be easily solved without big-scale changes in the technique lecturers deliver knowledge to students in creating a vibrant learning community. Through carefully monitored role play, the students can be encouraged to construct their knowledge together as a learning community

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