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ROLE PLAY AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

Nowadays, there are many teaching techniques that can stimulate learners' speaking skills. Modern techniques in the 21st century deal with 4C skills. They are communication, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and creativity and innovation. In this context, the relevant teaching technique is role-play [3, p. 104].

Role play is defined by Lowenstein as a dramatic technique that encourages participants to improvise behaviours illustrating the expected actions of people involved in defined situations [2]. According to Holt and Kysilka, role play shows the impact of students' actions and behaviour changes in accordance with their surroundings [1]. Hence, students have to be responsible for their roles and they should imitate and improvise as much as possible in a role-play practice.

As Porter-Ladousse claims, role play activities range from highly-controlled guided conversations at one end of the scale, to improvised drama activities at the other; from simple rehearsed dialogue performance to highly complex simulated scenarios [4, p. 3]. The researcher emphasises a wide scope of role-play activities. Such speaking tasks may be limited ones and they can be supported by prepared cues, for example by dialogues; or, vice versa, role-play might be an activity where learners rather improvise than rely on the practised dialogue.

The research was conducted at Ivankiv Lyceum of the Ivankiv Village Council of the Cherkasy Region, the participants were 22 students of the 9th grade. Students were divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group (11 learners of the 9th grade) received four weeks of explicit training on communicative skills development by means of role play. The control group (the other 11 learners) did not have any explicit training of that kind.

Learners' preferable topics of role play influenced my choice of activities for implementation. Here is an example of role play activity designed for the experimental group of the 9th grade learners.

To start with, the teacher wrote a few questions on the blackboard: *How often do you eat out? Do you like to eat in restaurants or cafes? How often do you eat fast foods? Have you ever been to a restaurant abroad?* The task was to be done in groups, and then the learners had to report to the rest of the class what they had found out about their friends. The teacher elicited names of food items by showing the pictures.

Then, students worked in groups of three and read the sample dialogue. Each group received a restaurant menu and had to write a dialogue on the topic of ordering food which they were going to role-play. Students took up roles of waiters and clients. Waiters were equipped with aprons and notepads to look like professionals. Once the students had finished role playing at their restaurant, they visited other restaurants. Finally, each group role played ordering food at the restaurant they liked best in front of the rest of the class.

Students who belonged to the experimental group got higher scores for the test after four weeks of training by means of role play. The study has shown that properly formulated

instructions and well-structured role play scenarios can have a beneficial influence on the 9th grade students' communicative skills development.

The findings of the research have confirmed that the success of role-play implementation depends on different factors, such as observation, reflection, interaction, planning, etc. It means that a teacher guides the role play process and establishes an environment where students perform activities based on authentic texts and real-life communication to improve their speaking skills.

The process of developing speaking skills should take place gradually, considering age-specific features and the level of knowledge, so it is important to understand which tasks should be used for a particular category of students. Moreover, teachers are required to apply appropriate techniques which emphasize verbal tasks focusing on meaning rather than language structure.

The study has underlined that the usage of role play at the English lessons has many advantages. First, it develops learners' fluency in speaking, as a wide range of language functions (e.g. apologising, greetings, etc.) is exercised. Therefore, through role play teachers may train students' speaking skills in any social situations.

Next, incorporating role play helps learners get ready for specific roles in life. It is beneficial to try out some jobs in pleasant and safe environment of a classroom with the language they will presumably use. In this case, role play is a helpful rehearsal and what is more, it allows students not just to acquire phrases, but to learn how to interact in a variety of circumstances.

Another advantage of role play is a possibility to develop learners' imagination. The roles may require creative thinking, so players' imagination is in high demand. The next reason to use role play is a chance to pretend someone else. Such a technique may help timid students to overcome their shyness that prevents them from speaking.

Finally, it is a great fun to role play. Apart from being involved in language production, learners enjoy themselves and have a great time.

To improve students' speaking skills by means of role play, teachers can follow the following recommendations:

1. *Select relevant scenarios.* It is important to choose role play scenarios that are relevant to students' interests, experiences, and language proficiency level.

2. *Provide guidance and feedback.* A teacher should offer clear instructions and guidance before initiating role play activities. Moreover, constructive feedback must be provided to help students improve their speaking skills.

3. *Encourage collaboration.* It is necessary to foster a collaborative learning environment where students work together to create and perform role play scenarios. Peer feedback and reflection are the elements of this process.

4. *Integrate technology.* It is beneficial to incorporate multimedia resources, such as videos or interactive simulations, to enhance the authenticity of role play scenarios.

5. *Motivate students.* A teacher can suggest them creating their own scripts, costumes, and supporting devices. Sometimes, the teacher may assign topics but allow students to choose independently. The learners should interact freely with their peers.

6. *Assess Performance.* Students' speaking skills must be assessed through observation, peer evaluation, and self-assessment. Rubrics can be used to provide objective feedback and track progress over time.

In conclusion, the results of this research have supported the formulated hypothesis that the strategic implementation of role play activities can significantly enhance the communicative competence of secondary school students in the English language. Considerable progress has been made with regard to increasing students' motivation to speak and improving their level of communicative skills. Role play provides students with opportunities to practice language in real-life situations, which enhances their fluency and confidence. Additionally, role play promotes active engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration. It also encourages creativity and problem-solving skills. Overall, role play is a dynamic and effective method for developing communicative skills in the English language classroom.

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