

# The Learners' Oral Proficiency and Role Play Activities A Tool of Effective Active Learning

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## Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the effects of Role Play activities on the students' oral proficiency. Role Play activities are designed to be applied for teaching English as a foreign language through the use of active learning approach which provides students with communicative situations by which they participate, perform and speak English in the appropriate way. In order to investigate the efficiency of Role Play activities in an EFL classroom, a classroom observation checklist is prepared to observe the students' oral proficiency in such type of communicative activities. The findings of this research reveal the significance of Role Play activities in enhancing the students' oral proficiency so that they become active and able to communicate fluently and accurately in a given communicative context.

**Key Words:** oral proficiency, Role Play activities, fluency, accuracy, active learning

## الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى البحث عن مدى تأثير تمارين نشاط المحادثة على مهارة التعبير الشفهي لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية. نشاط المحادثة الذي اعد من اجل تطبيقه في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية من خلال مبدأ التعلم النشط و الذي يمكن

المتعلم من المشاركة, الممارسة و التحدث باللغة الانجليزية من خلال نشاطات التعلم النشط. و من اجل البحث عن مدى فعالية نشاطات المحادثة تم إعداد قائمة تدقيق من اجل مراقبة أداء المتعلمين في مثل هكذا نوع من التمارين. ولقد أثبتت نتائج البحث عن الدور الفعال لنشاطات المحادثة في تحسين و تطوير مهارات المتعلم الشفهية حيث اظهروا نشاطا فعالا و أصبح بإمكانهم التحدث بكل طلاقة و على النحو الصحيح للغة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** المهارة الشفهية, نشاط المحادثة, الطلاقة الشفهية, الدقة اللغوية, التعلم النشط

## Introduction

Speaking a foreign language is the ambition of all learners. It becomes the most important matter in EFL contexts for both teachers and learners. The educators' and instructors' role is to find out strategies and techniques that may help learners to become fluent and proficient in the target language. Under the inclusion of the Competency Based Approach, the involvement of particular type of activities becomes an absolute necessity to teach the speaking skill in an EFL classroom. For this aim, using active learning is the best solution to encourage learners to practice speaking through communications, interactions and discussion individually or collaboratively. This process allows teachers to choose some communicative activities in the teaching of speaking skill such as Role Play activities.

## Review of Literature

### 1. Active Learning

“If you tell, i will listen.

If you show me, i will see. But

if you let me experience, I will learn”

--Lao-Tse --

In traditional learning, learners are following carefully the teachers' instructions till the end of the course. It is the teacher-centered approach in which learners are waiting for the

teachers' acceptance to participate. In such type of learning, learners are not able either to express themselves or to learn knowledge, they are passive. But under the new changes of the world in all fields, it becomes necessary to shift for the active learning.

Active learning is the idea of the English scholar R.W. Revans (1907-2003) , who focuses on the instrumental teaching methods. This process is defined by many scholars from different point views. For instance, active learning: a) aims to connect the teaching material with learners (Stark, 2006); b) focuses on the students' actions and thinking about the involved teaching material (Bonwell and Eison, 1991) and c) involves students in talking, listening, writing, reading and reflecting on the academic content, ideas or issues (Meyers and Jones, 1993). Thus, active learning is known as the 'student-involved learning continuum' (Davey, Powell, Powell and Cooper, 2002).

## **2. Why Active Learning?**

Active learning is a high extensive learning method which provides learners with practical experiences such project work, problem-solving, group discussion and so forth. In this case, learners use their intellectual efforts and their thinking abilities in order to apply and to assimilate (Harasim et al, 1997). Learning actively and experientially helps involving learners in dynamic, innovative and creative learning environment. In a comparative study done by David Waltman (2007), active learning is theorised that it has a positive effects on the learners' cognitive abilities using Blooms' taxonomy. In the same vein, Warren (1996) notes that using learner-centered approach enhances the learners' responsibility about their education and learning styles (Dunn, 1983). Likewise, the active learning significance is viewed on the development of the learners' thinking and writing abilities (Bonwell and Eison, 1991)

## **3. How to Use Active Learning?**

The ability to communicate effectively is the major goal of an active learning environment. This means that active learning involves all types of communicative activities so that learners can participate and perform a specific task. The use of active learning can

be conceptualised in various forms of learning models such as frameworks, Role Playing, games, questioning and using technology.

- a- Frameworks: They are significant in creating lively classrooms which guide teachers to take into account the four essential dimensions including the context setting, class preparation, class diversity and the continuous improvement (Auster and Wiley, 2006). By the application of this framework, the teaching becomes effective because the teacher is cognizant about the classroom setting and diversity so that he/she can vary the way of teaching to fit the learners' needs and interests. More profoundly, the teacher focuses on creating an effective climate by integrating communicative techniques in order to have feedback on the learners' achievement.

The assessment framework which is suggested by Bonwell (1997), it is based on answering the question '*did everyone get that?*'. Learners are engaged in quizzes and peer assessment and they are expected to think about the answer before displaying it in front the whole class. The problem-solving framework (Hillmer, 1996) is designed to provide students with challenging situations that need their statistical thinking and views. This framework is related to the learners' real world through the use of authentic tools.

- b- Role playing is another feature of active learning by which learners are involved in playing roles from numerous communicative contexts in order to perform, act and practice actively and effectively. More details of this activity are in section 8.
- c- Games: they are considered the most effective technique that is used to make learning active because learners are working in a joyful, stimulating and competitive learning environment (Umble and Umble, 2004).
- d- The use of technology: teaching a foreign language by using technology has positive effects on the students' academic achievement (Barak, Lipson and Lerman, 2006; Lee, Greenberg and Nicholls, 2007).

#### 4. Oral Proficiency

Many studies have dealt with teaching and learning oral language proficiency in EFL classes. Therefore, the definition of oral proficeincy has not one single view. Stern (1986) argues that oral proficeincy means the ability to master a language. In other words, EFL learners become able to communicate effectively and creatively using meaningful language forms. This means that proficeincy requires EFL learners to know the appropriate shape and the relationship exists between the language units. Likewise, Taylor (1988) emphasises the significant combination between language units including grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and the purposeful use of these language units when interacting in various social situations (Hymes, 1971). Defining oral proficeincy is unufisceint without stating Ommaggio's (1986) definition of oral proficeincy which focuses mainly on the knowledge of the linguistice forms of the target language in order to communicate verbally and functionally. It becomes apparent that oral proficeincy has two principle fundamental pillars which are: *fluency* and *accuray*.

## 5. Fluency

To begin with, Bailey (2005) points out that the coherent use of the norms of language speech to communiante confidently, automatically and easily is called '*fluency*'. This indicates that being fluent needs self-confidence which helps learners to speak and talk in the same flow without interruptions. Moreover, Hertman and Stork (1976) view fluency by the learners' ability to speak freely by using the language structures to transmit a message. In the same line of thoughts, Richards et al (1985) confirm the involvement of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress; rate of speaking, interjections and interruptions is the quality of fluent, natural and normal speech.

## 6. Accuracy

Accuracy refers to the ability of producing sentences in the target language that are grammatically correct (Richards et al, 2002). Moreover, accuracy includes the appropriateness of words, phrases and sentences to express an idea or point of view

(Broughton et al, 1980). However, Ommaggio (1986) insists the appropriate use of the linguistic structures, vocabulary and the cohesive devices. From another respect, the matter of being accurate is not the most important feature in oral proficiency characteristics. Taking into account the native speakers' grammatical mistakes, Davis and Pearse (2000) support the idea that EFL learners are allowed to make grammatical mistakes instead of losing their main idea to be expressed.

In his article "*Communicative language Teaching Today*", Richards (2008) notes that "fluency is the natural and the normal use of the language which occur when the learner is engaged in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and on going communication without disturbing his or her communicative competence." (p.14); this implies the importance of being fluent over of being accurate because the gist of communication is to convey the meaning rather than the form.

## **7. Factors Affecting Oral Proficiency**

There are many factors that affect the acquisition of oral proficiency which make differences in the learners' proficiency level. Ellis (1994) classifies these affecting factors into two categories depending on the source of each factor whether internal or external.

- a- The affecting internal factors include the unobservable features of learners' internal behaviors namely motivation, attitudes, the language transfer (Corder, 1983), and the learning styles (Li, 2010).
- b- The affecting external factors include factors that are related to the classroom and the community learning environment. These factors are based on the type of classroom, the input (Krashen, 1981; Littlewood, 1984), the output (Swain, 1985), the type of instructions (Pica and Doughty, 1985; Tom, 1997) and the amount of practice and culture (Kramsh, 1993).

In fact, oral proficiency is not easy to be achieved unless the teacher is aware about the appropriate ways that make the learning of English an active process through the use

of some communicative activities. Role Play activities are one of the most effective communicative techniques that is used to enhance the learners' oral proficeincy.

## 8. Role Play Activities

Generally, Role Play is a technique that aims to enhance the speaking skill in terms of performing roles, acting scenes or debating in a particular context. In the *Dictionary of Education* (Wallace, 1999), Role Play is defined as “an instructional technique involving a spontaneous portrayal (acting out) of a situation condition or circumstances by selected members of a learning group” (p.237). In addition, Livingstone (1983) describes Role Play as the process that empowers the learners' oral proficeincy by engaging in real life experiences that need the use of the target language. So, Harmer (2004) and Ments (1999) emphasise the importance of oral tasks that are related to the learners' real world situations.

## 9. Types of Role Play Activities

Teaching EFL through Role Play is considered as an attractive alternative teaching method. For Jonstone (1988), Role Play is not just playing or acting roles but even asking learners to recite dialogues is considered as a role play. This explains the Byrne's (1986) classification of Role Play into two categories: Scripted and Unscripted.

### a- Scripted Role Play Activities:

This type of Role Play involves learners to memorise and act out a scripted dialogue to convey the meaning of language items (Doff, 1988). This type of Role Play enables EFL teacher checking the learners' understanding of the chosen teaching method and stimulating learners to improvise the dialogues in the classroom. More specifically, Lurch (1996) argues that learners practice English through “the familiarity of the situations, the degree of politeness and the functions required for particular roles, such as persuading or argumenting.

### b- Unscripted Role Play Activities:

For Robinson (1980) this type of Role Play is an improvisation where learners build up their own character's talk, movements, situations, structures and themes; in this type, learners themselves who choose the language used and the development of the conversation (p.23). Likewise, Littelwood (1981) and Barkhuizen (2005) suggest techniques and tools; such as cards, imaginative meetings; that are used in the application of unscripted Role Play. This latter provides learners with opportunities to use their imagination, creativity and to practice the target language in its suitable context.

## 10. The Teacher's Role in Role Play Activities

It is argued that every teacher uses some particular teaching methods in order to fit the learners' linguistic and cultural needs. Ediger (2007) points out that *"each teacher should teach on his or her own specific personal philosophy of teaching and learning in order to provide guidance and direction in choosing objectives, learning activities and assessment procedures."*(p.18). Therefore, EFL teachers are expected to create the best conditions that help in the improvement of the quality of the learning process. For this aim, Harmer (2001) theorises that a teacher can be a:

- *Prompter*: the teacher's role is to offer the help to learners in an intelligent way so that learners cannot feel any frustration when playing roles. In this case, the teacher helps the learners to think about the missing words without disturbing the natural flow of communication.
- *Participant*: the teacher's role is an animator during the learners' practices. S/he can ask questions, add new information or make learners engaged in the intended activity. Harmer (1998) views that it is not surprising when teachers have a simple role in the learner's activity because *"learners will appreciate the teacher's participation at the appropriate level in other words, too much"* (p.94)
- *Feedback Provider*: if teachers know when and how to give their feedback, learners will get rid of their misunderstandings and hesitations. They become



motivated to perform and participate without fears of the teacher's embarrassing corrections and interruptions.

Accordingly, the teacher has no direct role to do within communicative activities but this does not mean that his/ her presence is unnecessary; s/he can maintain roles without dominating the whole activity. In other words, the primary role of the teacher is to create the suitable teaching setting where learners do most of the speaking task.

## Methodology

The present paper is based on action research which takes place mainly in the classroom where researchers and teachers employ some specific gathering data tools to overcome the difficulties of the educational research. In this sense, Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) identify the major principles of doing an action research which are *"to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more specifically and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life"* (p.10). Therefore, the action research is considered as the bridging gap between the teaching theoretical knowledge and the effective way to be practiced in the field.

### 1. Participants

The participants of this study are fourth year learners of Aicha Oum Elmouminine middle school in Ouargla. They are between 15 and 17 years old in their fourth year of studying English as a foreign language. They are taught under the Competency based Approach using the textbook *"On the move"* which follows the *"Spotlight on English"* book three. This study opts for just one fourth year class out of four, each class contains 35 learners, so, the total number of the participants of this study is 35. As far as the aim of this study is concerned, the choice of those participants is motivated by the fact that fourth year learners are expected to speak English fluently and accurately in different social contexts after four years of studying it in the middle school.

## 2. Classroom Observation

Observation is the most purposeful tool used in studies that focus on the exploring of the learners' behaviors. It is the appropriate tool that allows researchers to collect live data from live situations. Morrison (1993) argues that observation permits collecting data about the physical setting, the physical environment, the human setting, the interactional setting and the program setting. Thus, observation is *"the best data collection for obtaining information into the subject in a very natural environment"* (Morrison and Manion, 2000, p.305)

In this study, the non-participant classroom observation includes two observational techniques which are the video recordings and the teacher's checklist. In the first place, the learners are asked to play roles from the teacher's choice in the first two weeks and then they are free to choose any role of any topic to be played during the sessions in the rest weeks. In order to save the natural setting of the classroom, the teacher asks one of the learners to video record so that the learners feel comfortable and natural. In the second place, the teacher's checklist focuses on observing a) the learners' pronunciation including pitch of voice, appropriate speed and the effective intonation; b) the learners' language including the use of key words, accuracy, fluency, the use of communication strategies and the development of ideas and c) the learners' body language including confidence, self-esteem, gestures, facial expressions, interactions with partners and the presentation. The learners' observed behaviors are ranked from the very poor to the excellent performance.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the classroom observation reveals some positive results concerning the effectiveness of Role Play in enhancing the learners' oral proficiency. This leads to conclude by claiming that:

- The use of Role Play in EFL classroom makes it active, alive, interesting and

more enjoyable. This is motivated by the fact that even shy learners are able to communicate without any interruption from the teacher.

- Role Play is considered by many teachers as one of the most effective teaching methods that encourage learners to express themselves accurately and fluently.
- The use of Role Play increases the learners' motivation, creativity and imagination. Indeed, this occurs when learners engage in different authentic situations.
- It is believed, then, that Role Play bridges the gap between the world of the classroom and the learners' real world. It is because learners are willing to speak English with everyone and everywhere.
- It is argued that Role Play enhances the learners' oral proficiency. This evidence is proved by the learners' positive proficiency development which results through their participations in the school's media and other activities such as: Theatre and drama.

Learners need everything new in EFL classroom to help them learn better a foreign language and this is the teacher's task which cannot be completed without believing that teaching a foreign language for beginners is never an easy task. This indicates that the effective use of Role Play in EFL classes really contribute in enhancing the learner's oral proficiency.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The present study has investigated the significance of Role Play techniques in enhancing the learners' willing to communicate effectively in the target language. This is motivated by the fact that the success in teaching depends on the teachers' views on integrating new and various teaching techniques that make the class active and enjoyable. With regard to teaching, it is necessary to suggest some pedagogical implications to ensure a successful teaching and learning process.

#### *1- Role Play as a communicative strategy and a collaborative work*

Role Play techniques are considered the best ways to teach such important strategies

for communication. For instance, if the learner forgot a word or did not know how to say it, s/he tried to use one of the communication strategies in order to keep the natural flow of speaking. Indeed, with Role Play techniques, EFL learners can learn how to communicate easily and freely. On the other hand, Role Play is a collaborative work when learners work together through practicing dialogues in order to accomplish the task. In such kind of activities, learners have to change ideas, learn from each other, help shy learners to speak and try to create a social environment.

### *2- Role Play as a source for authentic scenarios*

It is argued that Role Play is primarily based on providing learners with scenarios related to their real-life. In this sense, learners feel familiar with the topic because they face the same intended scenarios in their everyday lives.

### *3-Role Play as a meaningful change*

In order to increase the learners' motivation to the English language, teachers should believe in change and look for new techniques and methods of teaching. Teachers should look for magazines, articles and forums related to classroom management.

### *4- Role Play as a source of vocabulary*

In order to enrich the learners' vocabulary, the teachers should introduce a list of the words needed in the dialogue before starting the Role Play. It is believed that practicing the same procedures from time to time improves the learners' vocabulary.

### *5-Role Play as a source of thinking*

When learners are asked to communicate in a given topic, they imagine themselves other persons and they interact likewise. By doing such task, teachers teach learners how to think in order to fulfill this task.

### *6-Role Play as an attractive way to learn English*

Teaching English with Role Play techniques motivates learners to learn English. This fact is proved with the interesting and the joyful atmosphere which occurs while using Role

Play.

### *7-Role Play as a significant tool to enhance the learners' oral proficiency*

Role Play is the best technique to improve the learners' accuracy and fluency in order to communicate effectively.

### **Pedagogical Recommendations**

On the basis of the results obtained, it is strongly suggested to opt for some recommendations that may add positive changes in the teaching of English as a foreign language in the Algerian Middle School.

To begin with, the ministry of education in Algeria should provide both teachers and learners with textbooks of communicative activities with different content. The former should contain the appropriate communicative activities for each stage taking into consideration the learners' needs, interests and age. Also, it should solve the teachers confusions about why, where and when to use the communicative activities in details in order to help them gaining successful teaching process; while the second textbook should only contain the same activities mentioned in the teachers' textbook without giving the key answers for those activities. In addition, it is necessary to create large spaces where learners feel themselves relax and comfortable. So, it is advisable to redesign school with special large spaces where learners can move, act out and play role of any given situation in order to motivate them to speak effectively in peaceful areas inside school.

Moreover, the uses of authentic materials make learners feel that there is nothing strange from their everyday lives. Authentic materials change the mode of the classroom into more attractive and joyful in which learners can be motivated. Those authentic materials may include the visual aids used by the teacher like pictures. Also, using media in EFL classroom attracts the learners' attention easily to follow the lesson with great eager. Furthermore, many studies have revealed many drawbacks of the Algerian textbooks. May be the most common drawback is the length of files in every textbook which hinder teachers from completing the program on time. Accordingly, they are

demanding to reduce the text book files.

It is noticed that there a big gap between learners of the same school and other schools. This situation explains the rarity of competitions between learners which bridges the gap between them. Additionally, through the competitions, the learner will do his or her best to gain the competition. In this sense, the majority of learners will attract the teachers' attention to allow them to take part in the competition.

## Conclusion

To sum up, making change in the Algerian school seems to be the responsibility of the whole teaching staff, starting from the teacher till the minister of education. This task needs a lot of money, time, efforts and patience from everybody feels that it is the generations' future. More important, the more the selection of tools and materials is careful, the more the results are wonderful.

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