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The Effect of Role-Play Activity on Iraqi EFL Student's Speaking Ability

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Abstract:

The present study examines the effect of role-play as a classroom activity on Iraqi EFL students' speaking ability. The present study tried to determine the effect of using role-play activity in speaking classrooms might and improve speaking ability in Iraqi EFL students at the intermediate level. The participants are 60 intermediate language students in Baghdad, Al-Rusafa second randomly selected. Then, they were divided into experimental and control groups. Twenty questions was administered to both groups as a pre-test of speaking and the participants were asked to answer them orally. The experimental group was taught speaking in lieu of the targeted role-play activity while the control group was taught speaking with respect the existing methods. After 15 sessions of the teaching, the post-test of speaking was administered in which the participants in both groups were asked to answer the post-test questions. The results indicated that the means of the two groups were significantly different which means that using role play activity has an effect on the speaking ability.

Keywords: Role-Play, speaking ability, teaching speaking

1. Introduction

In English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) literature, although the word "proficient" is often used interchangeably with words such as fluent, good, knowledgeable, component, bilingual, and so on, it is not always obvious what speaking proficiency entails; the term may be quite different from researcher to researcher (Galloway, 1987:25). Chaney (1998: 14) defines speaking as the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in variety of contexts. Speaking is important in language learning and teaching. For many years, students repeated the activities and memorized the dialogs but today, they should learn how to express themselves. They should learn to follow social and cultural rules in any situation. They learn to speak in different communicative situations.

Experiences and observations have shown that many Iraqi EFL students seemed to worry about how they can pass different activities like listening and speaking ones in the school. However, they failed to speak in real situations of language use. This assumption was supported by a pilot study done on a group of Iraqi junior EFL students in which their speaking ability was tested and traces of failure were proved to exist. Below are some of the problems in speaking ability:

- i. students do not have enough motivation to practice in the class,
- ii. students are too shy and afraid to take part in the conversation,
- iii. students have nothing to say, and
- iv. students do not like the materials.

The nature of the stated problem urges Iraqi English teachers to utilize various methods with the purpose of facilitating learning the speaking skill in the classroom, but such methodologies most often lead to failure. Among the activities used to improve the speaking ability, perhaps, the position of "role-play" seems to be ignored which has been the focus of the present study.

2. Literature Review

Arends (1998: 23) stresses on the practice of communicating with others as a way of making teachers' teaching style lively. It can prevent teaching from being routine and outdate. When trying new activities, they are not necessarily entertaining new principles. Most of them shared a common principle of emphasizing verbal tasks that focused on meaning rather than language structure.

Van Ments (1983: 23) adds some support and explanation on the benefits that accumulate from using role play activities by stating that perceptions are formed when ones brain codes and groups information. Comparisons and decisions can be made as researchers examine the way others behave in different situations. He further states that roles act as shorthand way of identifying, recognizing, and labeling a set of appearances and behaviors. People form assumptions based on appearance, behavior, and characteristic of a particular person. They predict what they will do in a given situation. Ladousse (1987: 12) notes that may be allocated by social position in everyday life, such as a teacher, engineer, police, clerk, president or juvenile delinquent. A role is a way of explaining or expression group norms and society's ability to handle an individual or a group.

Holt and Kysilka (2006: 192) confirm that surrounding or the context where you will be placed can influence the role behavior. When we see yourself or other role-players as members of congregation, an audience or participants in a parade, then the way we behave changes in accordance with our surroundings. For example, the way that we used to behave with our friend is different from the way that we behave in formal situations. They acknowledged that roles can also be influenced by a person's function or purpose. For example, people in the hotel industry may be carrying out the tasks of a manager, front desk staff, bell person, or representative. People who work in an airport will be carrying out the tasks of travel agent, flight attendant, captain or passenger. Since roles are dependent on context, function, and purpose, the instructor needs to carefully think through the enactment when he/she would like to employ role play activity in the classroom. The teacher will have to consider the students engagement, role assessing, duration of the activity, and concluding of the idea.

Van Ments (1983: 37) states that there are many terms can be interchangeable that associated with the role play teaching method, and different ideas comparing and contrasting role play with teaching methods. The interchangeable terms he states include game, simulation, simulation game, and role play game with no agreement on preferable term. Ladousse (1987: 19) shows simulation as complex, inflexible and lengthy. On the other hand, role play activity is brief, simple, and flexible.

Ones (1982) confirms that students have to take the responsibilities of their roles and expand their outcome as much as they can in the situation in which they find themselves in order for a simulation take place. Entire class can engage in role play, it can be fun, and it may result in better teaching and learning of language (Holt & Kysilka, 2006: 188).

Cornett (1999: 9) explains that students develop fluency in language and oral communication skills, as well as the use of the body language in face-to-face interaction, when they are participated in role play activities. Those skills are especially fundamental for students learning a foreign language who may not often speak English at home. These EFL students are motivated to employ the language and then improve fluency and pronunciation with the chance to participate in role plays. Role-players are simply required to play the other roles as they think how other roles may behave. As a result, role players will have clear understanding of reactions, values, feelings, and attitudes of the person in the same.

Holt and Kysilka (2006: 176) show that role play activities can be interesting and lead to improve learning, these activities can be used a student-student interactional style, they help EFL students to understand the importance of cooperation and to have an interest in learning.

Mitchell (1977:28) states that group processing depends on four elements: observation, reflection, interaction, and plan. Communication is the peer-relation; observation is the feedback given by peers; reflection is the thoughts provided by group members; and the plan is the procedure to achieve the shared outcome. Once students appropriately employ those elements, their oral skills will by working together. Teachers try to establish a classroom environment where students have authentic activities and real-life interaction that improve speaking. So, the students should collaborate and work in groups to achieve these objectives. There are many activities to improve speaking skill, one of them is role-play. In role-play activities students acted as if they are in varies social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the students such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student "You are David; you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night" (Harmer, 1984:42).

Group work maximize the amount of time available for oral practice and allows more than one students to benefit from speaking time. Working on groups also minimize the inhibitions of the students who fell shy who cannot speak comfortably in front of the whole class. Role-play can engage an all class, and it can be interest and lead the whole group to more effective learning (Holt & Kysilka, 2006: 187).

Thornbury (2006: 32) assures that conversation is an informal talk between one or more students, most students identify the ability to participate in conversations as a desirable language-learning goal. A fact that many language students feel that their most urgent need is to improve communicative competence, and they regularly choose "conversational" as their principle objective when answering needs analysis survey.

Huebner (1960: 21) declares "language is essentially speech, and speech is basically communication by sounds." According to him, speaking is a skill used by a student in daily life interaction whether at school or outside. The skill is required by much repetition; it is primarily considered a neuromuscular and not an intellectual process. It consists of competence in sending and receiving messages. Thus, speaking is a way for expressing opinions, ideas, or feelings to others.

Gardner (1999) assures that communication is a jointly co-constructed activity that speakers and listeners build their utterances upon the influence of their recipients. Brown and Yule (1983: 53) also draw a helpful distinction between two basic language functions. The first is the transactional function, which is considered the transfer of the information. The second is the interactional function, which is that the main goal of communication is to improve social relationships. The functions of spoken language are international and transactional. The primary intention of the former is to improve social relationships, whereas that of the latter is to convey information and opinions. In fact, most of our daily interaction remains international. Being able to interact in a language is crucial. Therefore, teachers should provide students with opportunities for meaningful interaction behavior about relevant topics by using student-student interaction as the key to teaching language for communication because "communication derives essentially from interaction" (Rivers, 1987: 25).

McInnis (1998: 540) searches about conducting interaction in the language classroom which states that the challenge for the next century is to begin using language to inspire, conciliation rather than conflict, and peace rather than war.

Hymes(1974: 32) suggests the notion of communicative competence as an alternative to Chomsky's linguistic competence. Communicative competence includes linguistic competence, but also includes a range of other sociolinguistic and conversational skills that enable the speaker to know how to say what to whom, when.

In the early 1970s, Savignon conducts an important study in to the improvement of communication skills built on a model of communicative competence including several essential characteristics. She defines communicative competence as “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting- that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adjust itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (Savignon, 2003:223).

Richards and Rodgers (1986: 17) examines three theoretical views of language: structure, functional and interactional. The role-playing/simulation method follows from interactional view. This view sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individual. Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of students as interactions.

Being dynamic rather than static and involving the negotiation of meaning, Savignon (1972: 11) states that communicative competence is not restricted to spoken language, but also involves writing. It is also context-specific which means that a competent communicator knows how to make choices specific to the situation. It is distinct from performance. According to him, competence is what one knows while performance is what one does.

3. Aims of the Study

Based on the problem stated as well as the literature reviewed in the previous section, the present study aims to study the effectiveness of using role-play as a classroom activity on Iraqi EFL students’ speaking ability.

4. Hypothesis

In applying role play in teaching speaking there is no statistically significant difference between control group and experimental group in Iraqi EFL students.

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

The subjects of the study were 60 Iraqi EFL students in Baghdad A-Rushafa 2nd. Selected students divided in two groups of 30 each and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group.

5.2. Materials and Procedure

The materials of the present study were of four sorts;

1. material for the proficiency test,
2. material for the pre-test,
3. material for the treatment, and
4. material for the post-test.

The material for the proficiency test consists of 25 questions including grammar, vocabulary and sentence completion. The material for the pre-test of speaking of the study included of 20 questions to be answered by the participants in both groups orally. The material for the study’s treatment consisted of teaching speaking with the participants’ ordinary teaching materials in speaking but with the role-play activities such as “acting out”, “group work”, etc. for the experimental group and without the mentioned activities (using the existing methods of teaching speaking) for the control group. Finally, the material for the post-test of the study consisted of the same 25 questions in the pre-test of speaking to be answered by the participants in both groups. The participants’ performance in the pre-test and the post-test of speaking were scored on the basis of five criteria: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, the criteria was adopted from Farhadi, Jafarpoor and Birjandi’s (2000) as rating scale.

6. Results

The data of the current study are analyzed via applying the following statistical methods: a t-value (t-test) was calculated between the post-test scores of speaking in the two participant groups to show the effect in the hypothesis of the study.

The mean scores of the two groups have been compared; where the mean score of the experimental group is 16.37, while the mean score of the control group is 7.66. This indicates that there is a significant difference in the total scores of post-test between the experimental and control groups in a favor of the experimental group. This stresses that the experimental group is better than the control group. So the null hypothesis is rejected (See Table 1).

Group	No.	\bar{X}	SD	DF	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	Level of significance
Exp.	30	16.37	8.31	102	3.20	1.99	0.05
Cont.	30	7.66	6.54				

Table 1: The Mean, Standard Deviation and T-test Value of both Groups in the Total Scores of the Post-Test

Table (2) below represents the results of two ANOVA coefficients calculated separately between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study:

Group	Covariance
Experimental	1.13
Control	2.06

Table 2: The Covariance Matrix between the Pre-test and the Post-test scores of the Experimental and the Control Group

Table 2 indicates that the coefficient of ANCOVA for the experimental group is lower than that of the control group. This means that the pre-test and the post-test scores in the control group are closer to each other as compared to those in the experimental group, which represents that treating the experimental group with role-play activities has resulted in increasing the range of their speaking scores in the posttest.

7. Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that the null hypothesis of the present study is rejected. This rejection means that the utilized treatment of the present study affected the outcome; thus, it can be concluded that using role-play as classroom activities improve performance in a test of speaking among Iraqi EFL students.

Based on the obtained results, certain justifications regarding the effectiveness of using role-play activities on Iraqi EFL students' speaking ability can be made. Accordingly, the students under experimental group seemed to succeed because of getting involved in role-play activities such as group work. It can be inferred that if the class is framed as a community to work together supporting each other, it will have the opportunity to work for the same aims. This builds their ability to interact with and understand each other, the best basis for all learning.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the present study confirm that role-play activity provide a sort of enjoyable and interesting environment for the students to flourish in. This reason leads to better attention in learning and stimulate them to participate in role-play activities. In role-play activities, students take a new identity and learn to use a foreign language for every day interaction.

As a future perspective regarding the present study, researchers are advised to expand the scope of this research study from limited students of intermediate classes to more classes with different levels of language proficiency. Additionally, the experiment can be replicated to different geographical areas, institutes and linguistic situations. The present study can be repeated across genders (male and female) in terms of student participants and teacher participants. Also, the sample size in this research study ($n = 60$) may be converted into a larger size of Iraqi (non-Iraqi) EFL participants to find out whether or not the results can be the same. Finally, it will be helpful if the teacher, while performing the role-play activity in teaching speaking skill, talks about a variety of topics including human characteristics such as embarrassment, happiness, sadness, or dishonestly and describes occasions when these characteristics might come in to play.

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