
RESOURCE
BOOKS FOR
TEACHERS

series editor

ALAN MALEY

ROLE PLAY

Gillian Porter Ladousse

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Foreword

The term 'role play' calls to mind the fable of the blind man trying to describe an elephant; the term takes on different meanings for different people. It certainly seems to encompass an extremely varied collection of activities. These 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. And there are few teachers who would not claim to have used 'role play' at some time.

It is surprising therefore that this much used (and abused) term, together with the shoal of activities it has spawned, has so rarely been presented as a coherent whole. The author of this book has attempted to do precisely this. The rationale for using role play is fully discussed, and guidance given for its use. An impressive array of techniques is then laid out, in such a way as to make them accessible even to nervous or inexperienced teachers, who might otherwise feel that role play was something too arcane to undertake.

The book moves from closely-controlled, teacher-directed role play activities through to fully-fledged simulations devised and written by the students themselves. It brings together into one collection an enormous range of activities for teachers at all levels to draw upon, and, we hope, to build upon too.

Alan Maley

Introduction

What is role play?

I would like it to be clear from the outset what I mean by role play. Let us look at the words themselves. When students assume a 'role', they play a part (either their own or somebody else's) in a specific situation. 'Play' means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible. A group of students carrying out a successful role play in a classroom has much in common with a group of children playing school, doctors and nurses, or Star Wars. Both are unselfconsciously creating their own reality and, by doing so, are experimenting with their knowledge of the real world and developing their ability to interact with other people. In this situation there are no spectators and the occasional eavesdropper (a parent or a teacher) may not even be noticed. None of the risks of communication and behaviour in the real world are present. The activity is enjoyable and does not threaten the students' (or the children's) personality. This 'playing' in role will build up self-confidence rather than damage it.

I prefer this description of role play in the language classroom to any precise definition, as it demonstrates clearly the kind of activity that I include, and that I do not include, under this heading. It fits the variety of activities in this book, but it does not fit many other activities that go by this name, such as the therapeutic role plays of the psychological professions, or the prepared sketches or improvisations that are acted out for the rest of the class, and which belong to the realm of drama. I do not mean problem-solving case studies in which students are asked to 'think like' Mr Smith or Ms Brown. In a role play they *are* Mr Smith or Ms Brown. In this way they have direct experience of the unpredictable nature of language in use.

It is probably neither possible, nor very profitable, to make fine distinctions between role play and simulations. Clearly however, simulations are complex, lengthy, and relatively inflexible events. They will always include an element of role play, though other types of activity, such as analysis of data, discussion of options, etc. are also involved. Role play, on the other hand, can be a quite simple and brief technique to organize. It is also highly flexible, leaving much more scope for the exercise of individual variation, initiative, and imagination. Whereas role play is included in simulations, it is not by any means confined to them.

The overall aim of both these types of activity is very similar: to train students to deal with the unpredictable nature of language. Whether they are playing themselves in a highly constraining situation (as in simulations), or playing imaginary characters in more open-ended situations (as in role plays), they need to think on their feet and handle the skein of language as it unravels. For this it will matter less whether the activity is a dress rehearsal for 'real life', than whether it is close enough to the students' experience for them to participate meaningfully in it. The degree of imagination involved will of course differ from person to person. Paradoxically it often requires less imaginative effort to role-play a well-known TV journalist than it does to role-play their own professional activity.

Why use role play?

Did you hear the story of the student who had completed level three of his text book dialogue course and went to England to try out what he knew, only to find he never needed those beautifully formulated sentences to ask for half a pound of bananas, as he just helped himself in the supermarket? But he was completely floored at the checkout when the cashier said, with a friendly smile, 'Got the 5p, have you, dear?' This anecdote underlines the necessity I have already pointed out of training our students to deal with the unpredictable nature of linguistic communication. However, many other pair work activities, including ordinary conversation, provide an opportunity to do this, and are also dynamic and fun to use in the classroom. What then are the special reasons for using role play? Here is a list of the main ones:

- 1 A very wide variety of experience can be brought into the classroom through role play. The range of functions and structures, and the areas of vocabulary that can be introduced, go far beyond the limits of other pair or group activities, such as conversation, communication games, or humanistic exercises. Through role play we can train our students in speaking skills in any situation.
- 2 Role play puts students in situations in which they are required to use and develop those phatic forms of language which are so necessary in oiling the works of social relationships, but which are so often neglected by our language teaching syllabuses. Many students believe that language is only to do with the transfer of specific information from one person to another. They have very little small talk, and in consequence often appear unnecessarily brusque and abrupt. It is possible to build up these social skills from a very low level through role play.
- 3 Some people are learning English to prepare for specific roles in their lives: people who are going to work or travel in an

international context. It is helpful for these students to have tried out and experimented with the language they will require in the friendly and safe environment of a classroom. For these students, role play is a very useful dress rehearsal for real life. It enables them not just to acquire set phrases, but to learn how interaction might take place in a variety of situations.

4 Role play helps many shy students by providing them with a mask. Some more reticent members of a group may have a great deal of difficulty participating in conversations about themselves, and in other activities based on their direct experience. These students are liberated by role play as they no longer feel that their own personality is implicated.

5 Perhaps the most important reason for using role play is that it is fun. Once students understand what is expected of them, they thoroughly enjoy letting their imagination rip. Although there does not appear to be any scientific evidence that enjoyment automatically leads to better learning, most language teachers would probably agree that in the case of the vast majority of normal people this is surely so.

Finally, role play is one of a whole gamut of communicative techniques which develops fluency in language students, which promotes interaction in the classroom, and which increases motivation. Not only is peer learning encouraged by it, but also the sharing between teacher and student of the responsibility for the learning process. Role play is perhaps the most flexible technique in the range, and teachers who have it at their finger-tips are able to meet an infinite variety of needs with suitable and effective role-play exercises.

It wouldn't work with my class

Teachers come up with a variety of objections to role play. They say: 'It will create chaos in the classroom.' 'It's just practice – my students won't actually learn anything.' 'My students can't act, they are too shy.' They claim that their students say: 'I don't want to be someone else.' 'I can't think of anything to say.'

These remarks, and the many others like them, reveal three main problem areas that a teacher may come across when starting to use role play. First, common misconceptions about the nature of role play exist, although I hope the preceding paragraphs have helped to clear up some of them. Second, there are aspects of classroom management which need careful consideration and which will be dealt with in the *Points to remember* section of this introduction. Finally, the concept of learning is often understood in a narrow and limited way. This issue is dealt with in the next section.