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ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES

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ENGLISH AT CIENFUEGOS UNIVERSITY LANGUAGES CENTER**

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EL JUEGO DE ROLES PARA POTENCIAR LA EXPRESIÓN ORAL EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS EN EL CENTRO DE IDIOMAS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE CIENFUEGOS

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ABSTRACT

The students in our classes are unique in their personalities, cultural experiences and values. If we are to be successful in leading our students through the task of learning, we must provide a variety of learning approaches so that these differences can be recognized and provided for in every classroom. While teaching a course to a group of workers from Palmares Hotel Group company, it was necessary to present the contents in a way they could actually acquire the knowledge they needed to carry out their labor successfully. The group was formed by a wide variety of employees both in terms of age and occupation within the company and it included animal trainers, security guards, janitors and office personnel that were supposed to use the foreign language to an elementary level. Taking into account these characteristics, a set of activities was designed in order to make them more appealing to the students and closer to their working needs. The results were positive regarding language acquisition and the satisfaction of all participants involved.

Keywords:

Role- play, elementary level, learning, foreign language.

RESUMEN

Los alumnos en nuestras aulas son únicos en sus personalidades, experiencias culturales y valores. Si queremos tener éxito en guiar a nuestros estudiantes en su aprendizaje, tenemos que asegurarles una gama de enfoques para que estas diferencias puedan reconocerse y atenderse en cada aula. Durante la impartición de un curso de inglés a un grupo de trabajadores del Grupo Hotelero Palmares, fue necesario presentar los contenidos de forma que pudieran realmente adquirir el conocimiento que necesitaban para enfrentar su labor de forma satisfactoria. El grupo estaba conformado una amplia variedad de empleados tanto en términos de edad como de ocupación e incluía entrenadores de animales marinos, guardias de seguridad, conserjes y personal de oficina que debía usar el idioma extranjero a un nivel elemental. Tomando en consideración estas características, se diseñó un grupo de actividades de juego de roles que les resultara atrayente y más cercana a sus necesidades laborales. Los resultados fueron positivos tanto en términos de adquisición idiomática como en el nivel de satisfacción de todos los implicados.

Palabras clave:

Juego de roles, nivel elemental, aprendizaje, lengua extranjera.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking will be oral fluency. This can be defined as the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately and without too much hesitation (otherwise communication may break down because the listener loses interest or get impatient).

To attain this goal you will have to bring the students from the stage where they are mainly imitating a model of same kind, or responding to cues to the point where they can use the language freely to express their own ideas (Note, however, that these two processes should be going on all the time, side by side, although the proportion of controlled speech to free speech will change as the course progresses. You will therefore need to give the students two complementary levels of training:

a) Practice in the manipulation of the fixed elements of the language (phonological and grammatical patterns together with vocabulary).

b) Opportunities for the expression of personal meaning.

Although in the classroom situation it is often necessary to concentrate at certain times on developing one of the oral skills rather than the other (e.g. part of the lesson may be given over either to speaking or to listening) we must not lose sight of the fact that oral communication is a two-way process between speaker and listener. Thus, in some situations one person may do all the speaking, as for example in a lecture. Here, typically, the speaker initiates and simply keeps up the flow of speech. This also happens sometimes when a person is giving instructions or directions. Normally however, as in a conversation, although one person initiates, speaker and listener are constantly changing roles and consequently speaking involves responding to what has been heard. In this case, speaking is an integral part of listening. It is this particular kind of interaction (listen-respond-listen etc.) which is difficult for the learners.

In the classroom, therefore, you will need to insure that the two skills are integrated through situations that permit and encourage authentic communication (e.g. especially through talk and discussion in small groups) and also that the learners are taught how to keep the channel of communication open in such situation (e.g. by asking for repetition and clarifications; by interrupting; by signalling agreement or disagreement etc.). needless to say that the message conveyed to the receiver must be clear enough for its decoding, that is to say, it must be intelligible.

Intelligibility is conventionally defined in phonological terms (e.g. being able to make the difference between key sounds such as (i) and (l)). At the level of basic understanding, this aspect of intelligibility is unquestionably important but, for the purpose of oral fluency, the term needs to be extended to include mastery of other areas of language.

For clearly, in order to be able communicate effectively, the learners also need an adequate mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Thus, in most language programmes the amount of time available for systematic speech training is bound to be limited: it will be necessary to concentrate on essential features such as the differences between key sounds, weak forms, basic stress and intonation patterns, and even here more attention will need to be paid to reception than to production. On the textbooks provide, partly because they feel the need for this themselves and partly because inadequacy in this area often causes communication to break down.

Speaking relates intimately to the other language skills, but it is most closely connected with listening. This connection between listening and speaking reveals itself in their character as parts of oral communication in which both of them -the receptive skill of listening and the productive skill of speaking- take part. In this process, both listener and speaker play different roles and, thus, while one is working on the encoding of the message, the other is decoding the meanings embodied in the language forms produced by the speaker 'and aided by non-verbal means such as facial expressions and gestures. In some situations, one person may do all the speaking and so keep up the flow of speech (transactional function of language) as, for example, in a lecture; and in other situations, such as in conversations, speakers constantly change roles (interactional function of language).

Teaching the spoken language should take account of both functions of language in their interrelationship, going from the conversational to the expository form of expression, and combining them as much as possible. Exclusive concentration on any of these forms of expression will yield speakers who are only able to take part in conversations or long talks, but are unable to combine them in a natural way.

The above, however, does not mean, under any circumstances, that speaking does not relate to reading and writing within the natural process of communication. This is clearly seen, for instance, when you meet a foreigner from an English-speaking country who is paying a visit to Cuba. He gifts you with a book and after he has gone back to his country, you write to him. Here the exchange covers listening-speaking first, reading then, and finally writing. So the interrelation among the skills in the process of communication is evident.

Furthermore, in the classroom, many sources of talk come from reading and writing activities. Students need dialogues as conversational models, but these are not necessarily the best stimulus for talking. A reading text on an interesting or relevant topic may be much more productive, often because the ideas are presented more directly. Similarly, a writing activity, done collaboratively in pairs or in small groups, will be accompanied by a good deal of

talking to get the activity done. Here, speaking is a by-product of the activity.

Speaking builds up on the basis of listening which should be more extensively developed and so it constitutes the broad receptive base from which the teaching of speaking derives, mainly in the early stages of learning. Often, improvement in listening comprehension will bring about an improvement in speaking: they are interdependent to a great extent.

DEVELOPMENT

Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak.

Classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech would therefore seem an important component of a language course. Yet it is difficult to design and administer such activities; more so, in many ways, than to do so for listening, reading or writing.

Speaking is one of the language skills to be developed in most school courses in English at all levels. The skill is either developed independently as a primary goal to be attained at the very end of learning and/or as a means for other skills such as reading. Consequently, as a general rule, speaking is a teaching point and this is reflected in the objectives of such courses.

Speaking is a more complex skill than listening. Here, several interrelated actions -both, mental and psychical- must take place instantaneously. Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983), states that a speaker should perform the following actions:

- a. He must think of the ideas he wishes to express, either initiating a conversation or responding to a previous speaker.
- b. He must change the tongue, lips and jaw positions in order to articulate the appropriate sounds
- c. He must be aware of the appropriate functional expressions as of the grammatical, lexical and cultural features needed to express the idea.
- d. He must be sensitive to any change in the "register" or style necessitated by the person to whom he is speaking, and the situation in which the conversation is taking place.
- e. He must change the direction of his thoughts on the basis of the other person's responses.

In addition to the above, and within the teaching learning process, teachers have to cope with a number of obstacles such as the size of the class, the number of hours for teaching the language, the classroom conditions, and the syllabus itself. Under these conditions, the understanding

and implementation of a wide range of more effective techniques and procedures through which the oral ability can be developed, become a must to counteract the negative impact of the above related complexities and obstacles.

In opposition to written language, speaking bears its own features which make it different from the former, and its teaching demands close attachment to those features for reasons of natural communication. These features can be synthesized as follows:

- incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical utterances;
- false starts and repetitions;
- simple syntax;
- unsubordinated phrases;
- interactive expressions like *well*, *oh*, *huh*;
- general vocabulary;
- less packed information.

Teaching the spoken language should then regard the above features so as to achieve profitable results in the communicative competence of this form of expression. Teachers need to know how to select and design appropriate and authentic language learning materials and activities in accordance with the objectives in mind, the age group of the learners, their interest level and language ability. Thus, teachers should select the texts (conversations and prose passages), functions and language structures in such a way that they reinforce and broaden mastery of speaking as it actually occurs. In addition, teachers should encourage learners through the use of materials and activities that bring the students' world into the classroom. Teaching the spoken language should then regard the above features so as to achieve profitable results in the communicative competence of this form of expression. Teachers need to know how to select and design appropriate and authentic language learning materials and activities in accordance with the objectives in mind, the age group of the learners, their interest level and language ability. Thus, teachers should select the texts (conversations and prose passages), functions and language structures in such a way that they reinforce and broaden mastery of speaking as it actually occurs. In addition, teachers should encourage learners through the use of materials and activities that bring the students' world into the classroom. Topics that bring the students' world into the classroom will make learning more meaningful and this guarantees long-term retention and subsequent language progress which is perhaps the most vital factor of all the effort done in helping to keep the interest in language learning alive. Teachers should, therefore, provide the students with activities for free expression and not only for language practice, the stage at which language learning often and unfortunately stops.

Role playing/simulation is an extremely valuable method for language learning. It encourages thinking and creativity, lets students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively nonthreatening setting, and can create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur. There is little consensus on the terms used in the role playing and simulation literature. Just a few of the terms which are used, often interchangeably, are *simulation*, *game*, *role-play*, *simulation-game*, *role-play simulation*, and *role-playing game* (Crookall & Oxford, 1990ab).

There does seem to be some agreement, however, that simulation is a broader concept than role playing. Ladousse (1987), for example, views simulations as complex, lengthy and relatively inflexible, but role playing as quite simple, brief and flexible. Simulations simulate real life situations, while in role playing the participant is representing and experiencing some character type known in everyday life (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Simulations always include an element of role play.

Scarcella and Crookall (1990), review research to show how simulation facilitates second language acquisition. Three learning theories which they discuss are that learners acquire language when: (1) they are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, (2) they are actively involved, and (3) they have positive affect (desires, feelings and attitudes). Comprehensible input is provided in simulations because students engage in genuine communication in playing their roles.

Active involvement stems from participation in worthwhile, absorbing interaction which tends to make students forget they are learning a new language. Students have the opportunity to try out new behaviours in a safe environment, which helps them develop long term motivation to master an additional language. In addition to encouraging genuine communication, active involvement, and a positive attitude, the simulated "real life" problems help students develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Traditionally, learner roles have been specifically defined in the role playing/simulation method, either through verbal instructions or role cards. However, Kaplan (1997), argues against role-plays that focus solely on prescriptive themes emphasizing specific fields of vocabulary, as they do not capture the spontaneous, real-life flow of conversation. Perhaps a better model for learner roles in the role playing/simulation method is Scarcella & Oxford's (1992), *tapestry approach*. Learners, according to this approach, should be active and have considerable control over their own learning. The students should help select themes and tasks and provide teachers with details of their learning process. In role playing/simulation, this can be achieved through the "design competition" mentioned above, or similar *divergent* simulations.

Students have some new responsibilities in role playing/simulation that they might not be accustomed to. Burns & Gentry (1998), looking at undergraduates learning experientially, suggest that some have not been exposed to experiences requiring them to be proactive and to make decisions in unfamiliar contexts. They recommend that instructors understand the knowledge level that students bring to the scene, and place close attention to the introduction of experiential exercises so that the student does not become discouraged.

The set comprises 20 role-play activities. Their frequency of use was set as one per lesson throughout the course, specifically in the semi-controlled to free practice stages. Their elaboration corresponded to small groups or pairs since it is one of the recommendations for developing speaking in such heterogeneous group. The implementation of the proposal will take place from September 2019 to January 2020 according to the chronogram stated for the course. It is important to point out that not all contents from the units in the syllabus will be used, only the ones that proved to present as more difficult to be acquired by the students, according to the diagnosis of the sample.

The elements that were part of the evaluation are the following:

- Grammatical accuracy.
- Use of communicative functions.
- Use of lexical units specific to the situational context presented.
- Fluency.
- Pronunciation.

During the application of the proposal these elements underwent changes since the practical implementation of the set brought about necessary adjustments. The typology of evaluation used was co-evaluation and evaluation by the teacher through negotiation to assure best results and optimal involvement of the students in their own learning. Students failing to accomplish three or more elements were considered as *failed*. The results showed a significant increase in the level of cognitive performance of the students, as well as in their level of motivation throughout the course, as represented in figure 1 and 2.

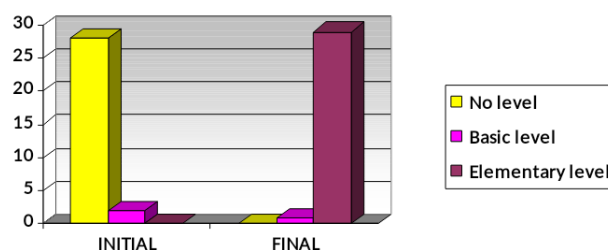


Figure 1. Comparison between stages (language acquisition).

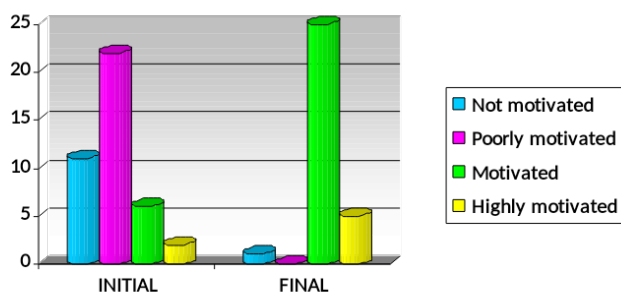


Figure 2. Comparison between stages (level of motivation).

CONCLUSIONS

It can be easily noticed that the students' language acquisition consistently increased, fitting their level of motivation towards learning the foreign language when they were assigned activities that actually resembled their daily working activities.

The set became an effective tool in the professors' hands in their systematic pedagogical practice when offering exercises that are in correspondence with the interests and characteristics of the students, maintaining the principle of the interaction during the process of learning the language and that as much time as possible should be used in class for the development of the oral fluency.

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