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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES WHEN USING THE TECHNIQUE OF ROLE-PLAYING IN SPEAKING EXERCISES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show the complete experiences, both benefits and challenges that A2 level students have when using role-plays in learning English as a foreign language. The respondents included in the survey consist of two groups of students: teenagers aged 12 to 15 (36 of them) and first-year students (38 of them) at the Department of Applied and Fine Arts of the University of Kragujevac (aged 18 up to 20 years). The teenage students attended an English language course at a private school in Kragujevac and were preparing for the international A2 knowledge test of the University of Cambridge, *Cambridge A2* test also known as *KEY (KET)* in its pre-2020 version. In part 3 (conversation), task 2, the knowledge of those taking the test is assessed by means of a kind of a role play. Role-play is organized in pairs where both members of the pair have an equal chance to ask questions and provide information in predetermined situations that are partially structured. The task of the students was to play a role, to understand the situation and to express themselves in an adequate way both linguistically and in accordance with communicative competences. It was noticed that the students did not or to a lesser extent met with such activities, that their motivation for learning was higher than usual during and after the activities. There was also a gradual reduction of stage fright and fear of public speaking. On the other hand, the challenges that the examinees faced were the inability to form sentences grammatically correctly, especially questions, that they lack everyday vocabulary, as well as that they often sound unnatural and not polite enough. Some respondents could not avoid using their native language for more than a few seconds or not make long pauses in communication using postman's sticks. Pedagogical implications of this research are the need for English teachers to systematically, and for a longer period, devote at least part of the lesson to such activities with the aim of relieving students of nervousness, activating knowledge and preparing for the challenges of the 21st century and the international circumstances of the use of the English language. We hope that this is one of a series of further investigations on similar topics that will give us better insight into how to improve learners' communicative competence of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: role playing, Cambridge University A2 exam, English as a foreign language, fluency, communicative competence, stage fright, communication, speaking/conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to communicate successfully – to understand and to be understood has never been greater. English as an international language makes it possible for its users now more than ever to explore different situations and contexts in which they may find themselves – travelling, presenting their work, working for international companies, meeting new people and cultures. Thus the need to be able to engage successfully in spoken communication for non-native speakers of English seems to be of utmost importance.

As the Communicative Approach advocated at its appearance in 1970s, it is not enough to master just the linguistic forms and structures to be able to use the language (Widowson 1978) The term functions was coined (Wilkins 1971) to define the students' purpose of using the language to invite, promise and similar. It was concluded that for the successful use of language it is necessary to have the communicative competence (Hymes 1971) on top of the linguistic competence. So the goal and the method of Communicative language teaching is reaching the communicative competence and the important element of such an approach is the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman 2003: 121).

One of the typical activities practiced by Communicative Approach are role-plays. To research the benefits and challenges in using role plays at A2 level of learning the English language was chosen because it is an interaction between two speakers as is often the case in the real-life communication.

According to the CEFR standardization designed to assess the foreign language ability¹, the sets of competences and sub-competences have been defined from A1, through A2, B1, B2, C1 to C2. In line with these levels, the Cambridge University introduced to the existing exams and certificates Cambridge A2 Key in its two variants – KEY and KEY for Schools.² The test / exam consists of several parts and in part 3 of the test (speaking) students are asked to have “[...] conversation with an examiner and then with each other. This group situation is meant to be more realistic than one-on-one conversational situation”.³

2. THE ROLE PLAY IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Role play is defined as the projection of real-life situations which include social interaction in the classroom. EFL students play different roles in the oral communication in order to solve some practical problems they may encounter in

¹<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

²<https://www.ef.com/ca/english-tests/cambridge-exams/ket/>

³Ibid.

real life (Quing 2011: 36–39). It is expected that both teachers and students perform spontaneous acting. Students are encouraged to use different tones of voice, facial expressions movement and acting as much as possible in order to bring life to the classroom. It is believed that by using role-plays in an EFL classroom teachers motivate students to learn better as they can see that learning has a practical use for them. Furthermore, role-play activities have proven to be fun for students and bring the different dynamics to the learning environment. Some students also enjoy acting out for the pure reason of being someone else which additionally brings the excitement and motivation to learning.

As opposed to games and other fun activities, role plays are not just any fun activities, but specific interactive activities which focus on communication and which are aimed to be student-centered. Apart from that, the collaboration and interaction of the students which resembles the real-life situation are considered to be the key elements.

Thus one of the goals is to improve communication ability / competence for students and develop their interpersonal skills.

Students can be exposed to a potentially wide variety of experiences while improving overall communicative competence – a variety of structures, functions and vocabulary necessary in order to successfully perform the role-plays. Apart from that, the role play represents a possibility to practice listening and speaking in the target language, in the case of our research English.

As when using role plays teacher can only to an extent predict and control the language – both vocabulary, construction and grammar-wise, it can be demanding both for him and the learners to perform the role play well. At the same time, it represents its beauty and makes both teacher and students think out of the box.

On the other hand, the aim of the role plays is to enable students to gradually build up their confidence and overcome the fear of speaking. It is achieved because the shy students are given the possibility to become another person and thus feel more comfortable. Some students reluctantly speak about themselves, but by adopting another character and accepting their role in the situation they may save themselves from speaking out loud their own opinion, and that in itself may be liberating.

Moreover, the interaction between the characters generally provides the elements of the culture, opportunity to rehearse and hopefully foster positive collaborative atmosphere in the classroom.

There is also proof that learning and retention of the vocabulary in EFL students is helped and achieved to a greater extent as compared to other methods (Soori et al. 2023: 1835).

The roles of the teacher include that of a facilitator, provider of immediate feedback and reference information (Richards, Rodgers 2003). For that reason,

the classroom is perceived as more student-centered than when other approaches and methods to teaching English as a foreign language are used.

3. THE RESEARCH

The aim of the paper was to compare two groups of students who speak Serbian as a mother tongue and their linguistic and communicative competence while performing a specific A2 Cambridge Key part 3 task 2 which is a structured version of a role play. The benefits and challenges met during the research could have pedagogical implications for the EFL teachers in Serbia and worldwide. The similarities and differences between the two age groups observed would further provide examples of good practices and point to possible valuable input to EFL teachers especially at elementary level of education. The paper is not aiming to provide universal answers but wishes to interest more teachers to do similar research.

The first group consisted of three groups of teenagers aged 13 to 15, in total 36 (26 girls and 10 boys), educated at a private language center in Kragujevac, who were getting ready to take the Cambridge A2 key test at the British Council in Belgrade during 2022 and first part of 2023. The second group included 38 students (27 girls and 11 boys) at the Visuals Arts Department at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, on their first year of studies where English is their mandatory subject.

There are different expectations and information as to which level of English students have after finishing secondary schools in Serbia. Some responsible bodies expect them to have level B2 on average. However, our teaching experience, especially when it comes to spoken communication, does not support that⁴. On the other hand, the majority of 12–15 year-olds taking private classes of English tend to be on A2 level and above.⁵

3.1. THE MATERIAL

The “cards” – question cards and information cards are the official material which the author used in this research were found in the official materials for preparing English A2 Key test up to the year 2020 when this part of the speaking test was changed. The information exchange was based on the “question card” which consists of the prompts from which the students should make meaningful, grammatically correct and situation appropriate questions and the “information card”

⁴ The author has been teaching EFL to the students of the Visual Arts Department for 10 years.

⁵ The author has had a 25-year-long experience in that matter.

which consists of the condensed, poster or ad-like information which should be made into meaningful, grammatically correct and situation appropriate sentences providing the information.⁶

The difference between A2 Cambridge Key and A2 Cambridge Key for Schools exams is that the latter is aimed at teenagers and deals with topics more to their knowledge of the world and interests, whereas the former is considered to be the exam for adults. However, the Cambridge University has no restrictions, only recommendations as to the test takers and their age.

3.2. THE PROCEDURE

In both groups the teacher presented the activity stating the rules of the activity, number of the participants and the goal. For the first role play teacher provided both roles to both groups of students and elicited both cards on the whiteboard: both the questions and the answers. She then discussed with students the grammar, especially of the question forms, the vocabulary including different level of politeness and situation markers such as starting the conversation, asking for repetition, thanking and finishing the conversation.

The teacher then provided both groups with two cards, a question card A1 and answer 2B for one student, and an answer card 1A and question card 2A. Students in both groups worked individually and wrote full sentences for the questions and answers for both tasks. This was followed by students acting out in pairs and teacher listening. There were approximately 20 pairs and 26 combinations of cards so some cards were repeated. The teacher made sure that the cards which were repeated two times were not immediately one after the other so that the students would not copy from one another.

Each student had equal opportunity to be the person seeking the information and the person providing the information.

The teacher and students listened carefully and students had the task to elect the best pair whereas the teacher wrote down remarks and errors in her notebook. After acting out the role play the students were asked how they would correct certain mistakes and why they chose a certain pair to be the best.

On the next class students were given different sets of cards and without any recap the students were asked to repeat the activity. Previously they and their parents (in case of the teenagers) signed the consent form to be recorded for the purpose of this research.

Out of numerous textbooks and collections of tests preparing for the Cambridge A2 Key the author has chosen 16 different topics which she found most

⁶ https://eslcafe.ru/materials/ket-speaking-sample-cards-kartochki-1/?fbclid=IwAR0pdIq1UAn68vpXgRN2XzujOYzNuBSj8R8pm8L6ECvku45HEs4HROIh3_k

appropriate for both groups of students, and within the topics a few different variations. All the cards were taken from the official materials available in the bookshops and online. The topics included:

- A visit to the dentist / vet / hairdresser / nail salon
- A visit to a concert / museum / gallery / shopping center / amusement park / a TV show / café / sandwich bar
- Programming / language / sports / dancing lessons
- Painting / music / cycling / running competition

3. THE RESULTS

The overall impression by both groups was that the experience was pleasant and should be repeated. There was a lot of laughter, some of which could be ascribed to being shy and feeling uncomfortable while speaking in public. No students refused to do the task, although a smaller percentage showed some reluctance in both groups.

Whereas the group of students at the university stated that they have never had such an activity during their English classes at state schools if we exclude reading and thus taking on a character from the book, and that only in lower elementary grades, the group of students from the private school stated that “the topics are more adult, but the trick is the same as on the FLYERS test”.⁷

When asked who they think the best pairs were and why, students in both groups stated:

- “Ana and Milos because it all goes smoothly...” (teenagers)
- “[...] because they truly listen to each other.” (teenagers)
- “Rajic and Lenka because their play is like the real one in the shop [...] it has an end and lots of nice words.” (university students)
- “Mihajlo and Marija because they don’t make too long breaks.” (university students)
- “[...] they are ok because they don’t sound like robots.” (teenagers)

When asked what the biggest challenges were, teenagers stated that:

- sometimes they were not sure what they were supposed to ask because the situation was only partly familiar to them as they have never been in it in reality but know that they “will when they get a bit older”;
- the order in which the questions were asked was not the same as the order in which the information was presented on the answer card, so they had to look;

⁷ FLYERS is a part of Cambridge Young Learners set of tests. It is the highest of three YL levels and in the speaking part also has a structured, much simpler role play activity.

- they were shy to ask the person in the pair to repeat;
- they didn't know how much time they had for thinking before giving an answer or asking the next question.

The university students stated that:

- the communication went too fast and that it was difficult to them to understand the other person;
- they were not sure if they were saying the things correctly;
- sometimes they knew when they made a mistake but couldn't go back;
- they could not understand what the person wanted from them;
- they could not put snippets of information into the questions;
- the order in which the questions were asked was not the same as the order in which the information was presented on the answer card, so they had to look;
- they were shy to ask the person in the pair to repeat;
- they didn't know what to do and how to help the pair when they got stuck;
- it was hard not to use Serbian, especially when they could not find a word or an expression.

The researcher also noticed on the structural and grammatical level that the biggest challenge for the students in both groups was to ask questions, wh-questions in particular.

For example: *How does it cost? What it costs? Did Are you open? Where I can buy this tickets? Are your shop big or small? When disco start?*

The misuse of singular / plural was also noticeable.

Some students could not turn the written information such as *student ticket / price / in pounds* or *age / allowed* into the question. They seemed to repeat the written words and ask unnatural and incorrect questions such as: *How is all price for students? How is the age of singer/cyclist?*

The researcher noticed breaks in communication, pausing and not completely listening to the other person in the pair in both groups, but more presently in the group of university students.

When it comes to politeness, being natural and truly starting, replying, having small talk and finishing the conversation, it is interesting to notice the difference: the teenagers tried to be polite but kept repeating the same words such as: *fine, thanks, right, great, amazing*. On the other hand, the university students started in one third of the cases to go in medias res without starting the conversation and / or without a proper finishing of the conversation.

3. THE CONCLUSION

The role play as an activity which is used to get students learning English as a foreign language more exposed to the natural, life-like situations is useful and should be a regular part of English lessons. However, it should be approached

systematically and with small steps at the start as the teacher must be aware of all the possible obstacles for performing the tasks successfully and thus enjoying the activity such as: fear of speaking in public, fear of novelty, not understanding the context, not understanding the concept of role playing, not having enough structures or vocabulary, a temptation to break into L1 and give up all too easily. Both teachers and students must be aware that language input and communication and collaboration can only be controlled to some extent and the unpredictability can be both a curse and a virtue when communicating in a foreign language.

The particular structure role play is useful as the students may encounter such situations in everyday life in L1 and certainly when abroad in any country where English is a means of communication.

The author hopes for more research on this topic which will shed a deeper light and provide aid to teaching, learning and improving the communication competence in English.

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БЕНЕФИТИ И ИЗАЗОВИ ПРИЛИКОМ УПОТРЕБЕ ТЕХНИКЕ ОДИГРАВАЊА УЛОГА У ВЕЖБАМА ГОВОРЕЊА У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ КАО СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Резиме: Циљ овог рада је да прикаже комплетна искуства, и користи и изазове које ученици на нивоу А2 имају када одигравају улоге у настави енглеског језика. Испитаници које је истаживање обухватило састоје се од две групе ученика: тинејџера узраста од 12 до 15 година (укупно 36) и студената прве године студија (укупно 38) на Одсеку за примењену и ликовну уметност Универзитета у Крагујевцу (узраста од 18 до 20 година). Ученици су похађали курс енглеског језика у приватној школи у Крагујевцу и припремали су се за међународни А2 тест знања Универзитета у Кембриџу. Кембриџ А2 тест познатији и као KEY (KET) у својој верзији пре 2020. године. У делу 3 (разговор) у задатку 2 оцењује се знање оних који приступају тесту помоћу својеврсног одигравања улога. Одигравање улога одвија се у пару, при чему оба члана пара имају подједнаку шансу да постављају питања и пружају информације у унапред задатим ситуацијама које су делимично структурисане. Задатак ученика је био да одиграју улогу, разумеју ситуацију и да се на адекватан начин изразе, и језички и у складу са комуникативним компетенцијама. Примећено је да се студенти нису или јесу у мањој мери сретали са оваквим активностима, да им је мотивација за учење била већа него иначе током и после активности, као и постепено смањење треме и страха од јавног наступа. Са друге стране, изазови са којима су се испитаници суочили били су неспособност да граматички тачно формирају реченице, нарочито питања, недостатак свакодневног вокабулара, као и чињеница да често звуче неприродно и недовољно љубазно. Поједини испитаници нису могли да не користе материјал језик дуж пар секунди или да не праве дуже паузе у комуникацији користећи поштапалице. Педагошке импликације које ово истраживање доноси су потреба да предавачи енглеског систематично и у дужем периоду бар део наставног часа посвете оваквим активностима са циљем да се ученици ослободе треме, активирају знање и припреме за изазове 21. века и међународних околности

употребе енглеског језика. Надамо се да је ово једно од низа даљих истраживања на сличне теме које ће нам донети бољи увид у то како да побољшамо комуникационе компетенције ученика енглеског као страног језика.

Кључне речи: одигравање улога, испит А2 Универзитета у Кембриџу, енглески као страни језик, флуентност, комуникативна компетенција, трема, комуникација, говорење/ разговор.