

Using Structured Role-play to Practice and Assess Speaking, Listening, and Writing Skills

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine two or three well-prepared students stepping to the front of the class and speaking English to each other for three or four minutes. Their speaking is animated and lively. They use actions, gestures, and props. As each pair or threesome performs, the other members of the class, the audience, keenly watch and listen. During this class the teacher sits quietly at the back of the classroom, enjoying the students' creativity while marking the student performances. The teacher's presence on this day, however, is minimal. The student performers largely run this class for their peer audience. Much English is spoken, students listen attentively and questions are asked and answered in earnest. Such a class is the end result of a structured role-play unit.

This article defines and provides a rationale for using structured role-play in EFL classes. Secondly, it describes a structured role-play unit that has been used successfully in novice-level Freshman English classes at Asia University. Finally, the article makes suggestions for adapting structured role-play to suit various classes.

STRUCTURED ROLE-PLAY: DEFINITION AND RATIONALE

I use the term "structured" in contrast to regular role-play. In regular role-play, as described in the literature (Underhill, 1987), students are given a set of instructions, asked to imagine themselves in certain roles, come up with appropriate language, and perform immediately. Structured role-play is different in that it provides students with language scaffolding and time to prepare. Novice-level students in particular usually do not have the language skills and/or the confidence needed for off-the-cuff exchanges required in regular role-play. Structured role-play (hereafter SRP) gives these students the time they need to think of their roles and be creative with the language they are being asked to use. Additionally, during the preparation phase, students help each other and have opportunities to ask the teacher specific questions about their work in progress. SRP allows students to use language functions, small-talk expressions, gestures and grammatical structures they have previously learned in class, within a scenario that they create with their partners.

A STRUCTURED ROLE-PLAY UNIT

The following is a description of a structured role-play unit used in Freshman English classes at Asia University. The unit's theme is an invitation: Students will ask and talk to their partner(s) about one activity, such as going to a movie, dancing at a club, or going to a baseball game. This SRP unit was completed in seven, 45-minute class periods. The unit has two general phases: preparation (Days 1-5) and performance (Days 6 and 7). Below is an outline of the seven-day unit followed by a detailed description of what occurs in class on each of the days listed. (The outline is written on the blackboard on day one for the students' reference.)

Role-Play Unit: Outline

Day One: Introduction

Day Two: SRP Writing

Day Three: SRP Writing Continues and Written Work Collected and Checked

Days Four and Five: Rehearsal and Prop Creation

Days Six and Seven: Pairs/Groups perform their SRPs

Students in audience complete Listening Task Sheet

Role-Play Unit: Daily Descriptions

Day One

Three things are accomplished on day one. First, students receive the handout below and the teacher goes over the handout with the entire class.

Speaking Role-Play: Invitation (*Shoutai*)

A) You must do the following:

1. Find a partner(s)
2. Think about something fun to do (going to a movie, dinner, a sports event)
3. Write an "invitation" conversation with your partner
4. Practice speaking
5. Perform your conversation

B) Include the following four functions:

1. Greet your partner
2. Discuss what you will do
3. Set a meeting place
4. Set a meeting time

C) Grading:

1. You spoke loudly and clearly
2. You remembered your lines
3. You spoke at least 7 lines of 6 words (each student)
4. You used props well
5. You submitted a clearly written copy of your conversation
6. You worked hard preparing with your partner

Second, students find partners. Because the success of their SRP and their grade are predicated on working well with a partner, the teacher encourages students to find a reliable partner with whom they like to work.

Third, partners sit together and begin brainstorming invitation scenarios. The teacher elicits several examples of invitation scenarios from students and jots them down on the blackboard.

At the end of day one, the teacher reiterates that punctual attendance is vital to the success of SRPs.

Days Two and Three

On days two and three, students sit together with their partners and write their conversations. The teacher refers the students to the four functions in section B of the handout and reminds the students to include these functions in their conversations. Since this type of language has been practiced before, the teacher lists useful textbook pages and relevant supplemental materials on the blackboard for the students' reference. Stipulating the language functions serves two purposes. First, it assures that students recycle previously learned material. Second, the required language functions become the basis for the listening task (see below) during the performance phase.

Although the teacher decides on a broad theme, such as an invitation, and certain language functions, which provide the structure of the conversations, the students are encouraged to be creative when writing. The type of invitation scenario and specific language used are completely left to the students' discretion. This balance of structure and freedom is especially appropriate for novice-level students. Students have leeway to be inventive with the language, while the structure provided by the teacher assures that even the least proficient students can compose a comprehensible conversation.

After approximately ten minutes discussing the assignment as a class, students begin writing. Students are asked to write their conversations on A-4 paper using their initials to signify each speaker's lines. As the students write, the teacher circulates and helps pairs address their specific writing questions.

On day three students continue writing with their partners. The goal is to finish writing conversations by the end of this class. Again, during this class the teacher circulates, answers questions, and encourages students to stay on task. Before dismissing the class the teacher collects the completed drafts from each pair. The teacher will return the conversation drafts at the beginning of the next class. Any pairs who have not finished their drafts must

finish and submit the draft in the teacher's mailbox before the end of the day. SRP rehearsal will begin next class.

Collecting the drafts at the end of day three serves two purposes. First, it forces the less motivated students to stay on task and makes sure all students are keeping up with the work. Second, the teacher can quickly check and provide feedback about written work to those who still need it. Since the teacher circulated and worked with the students during the in-class writing periods, this check should require minimal work.

Days Four and Five

At the beginning of day four, the teacher returns the checked drafts to the students. If there are minor or no comments on their written work, these students immediately begin rehearsing their conversations with their partners. Students who receive more detailed comments are asked to check their written work, make corrections, and speak to the teacher for help.

The remainder of day four and all of day five are conducted as follows. Once all the students are busy rehearsing with their partners, the teacher circulates. The focus is now on the spoken language. Often students have questions about pronunciation and intonation. Unlike the occasional lapse into *katakana* pronunciation that sometimes occurs during more typical textbook conversation practice, students seem very eager to get intonation and pronunciation right for their SRPs. It is this teacher's opinion that because students know they are responsible for their peers being able to comprehend what they say (see listening task below), performers put more effort into pronunciation and intonation. Student performers want to speak clearly for their listening peers. This point in the preparation thus becomes a great opportunity for the teacher to help individual performers with their pronunciation and intonation questions.

While circulating, the teacher should prod students to progress from reading rehearsal, to memorized rehearsal, to rehearsal with proper intonation, pronunciation and gestures, to the ultimate goal of animated rehearsal with props. Keeping this continuum in mind, the teacher can push students along, as they satisfy each step.

Use of Props

A note about props is in order here. In my experience (having taught this unit initially without requiring them) the single "ingredient" that makes the SRPs enjoyable and dynamic is the use of props. It's a good idea for the teacher—possibly near the end of day four—to

stop the class and demonstrate effective use of a couple of props. From the simple rearrangement of chairs in the classroom to the use of background music, masks and/or posters, props make the SRPs very fun to watch and help students animate their conversations. I bring supplies such as poster paper and markers to class on days four and five. Students are free to use them. I also encourage them to bring in their own materials.

Listening Task

Before the end of class on day five, I distribute a listening task sheet and preview it. The task sheet consists of the following set of questions, which the listening audience must answer for each performing pair/group:

What are the speakers' names? What are they going to do? When will they meet? Where will they meet?
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During the performances on days six and seven, the listening audience will listen for specific information. As mentioned above, since the same four language functions were required of all speakers, the conversations are sure to include certain chunks of language. As the speakers perform, other students listen carefully for this information, using the listening task sheet to focus their attention.

The conclusion of day five brings the preparation phase of the unit to an end.

Days Six and Seven

At the beginning of day six, students get together with their partners for five minutes for one last rehearsal before beginning the actual performance schedule. After this rehearsal, the teacher collects the written conversations from all the pairs.

On days six and seven, the performance days, three things happen simultaneously: students perform their SRPs; the peer audience watch, listen, and ask questions to complete the listening task sheet; and the teacher assesses each student as he or she performs.

As mentioned above in the description of day five, students in the audience must listen for specific information while their peers perform. When a pair has finished their performance, the teacher asks the performers to remain in front of the class. At this time, students in the listening audience must ask questions of the speakers in order to complete

their listening task sheets. If a listener missed some information, he or she must formulate a question and ask the speaker. This provides the obvious opportunity to practice asking informational questions. Listeners also will often ask how to spell certain words, thus recycling classroom English.

Additionally, this brief question and answer session after each performance is a good form of implicit feedback for the performers. For example, if a particular performer is asked several questions by the peer audience she may realize that she needed to speak louder or focus more on pronunciation. The questions the peer audience ask may stir the performers to think more about aspects of their speaking. This is a gentle way of reinforcing the idea that confidence and proficient speaking can be improved by daily, in-class speaking practice.

While the students are performing the SRPs, the teacher sits at the back of the class and marks a grade sheet for each student in a pair/group. The grade sheet reflects the criteria that were stressed during the preparation phase. The following is the grade sheet used to assess each student as he or she performed:

Spoke loudly and clearly	0	1	2	3	4	x 3 =
Remembered your lines	0	1	2	3	4	x 3 =
Used props well	0	1	2	3	4	x 2 =
Spoke enough English	0	1	2	3	4	x 3 =
Attendance during Preparation	0	1	2	3	4	x 5 =
Submitted written copy	0	1	2	3	4	x 1 =
						Total points: _____/68

Note: Categories can easily be weighted by using multipliers as illustrated above.

Also, as the teacher is marking, he has the performing students' written conversation at hand. If a performer is nervous or is struggling to remember a bit of his conversation, the teacher can refer to the written conversation and help the speaker along by reading the forgotten word aloud. This helpful prompt is usually all it takes to assure that the pair can complete their conversation. This needs to be done sparingly, though; it is meant to aid a student, not to be a crutch.

After the last speaking performance on day seven, the teacher collects the listening task sheets for grading. This concludes the unit.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING AND ADAPTING SRPs

The unit discussed above is one permutation of what a SRP unit can be. In general, SRPs consist of a theme, required language functions, prop requirements and stipulations about number of lines and words to be spoken by each performer. The teacher can manipulate these variables to suit his or her class level and needs.

I chose the invitation theme because much of the language that had been presented prior to the SRP unit, lent itself to this. Of course, other themes such as complaining, dating, or asking for directions—to name but a few—could be used. The teacher must make decisions about theme and language functions to be included based on those that have already been covered in a class. A major reason for doing the SRP unit is to recycle learned material in novel ways that the students enjoy.

Props are essential. So much so, that I plan to expand the unit described above by one day. As mentioned, props make the performances dynamic. This ratchets up the level of interest of the whole class. More specifically the effective use of props benefits both the performers and the listeners. Props help performers remember their lines. A temporary memory lapse is often jogged back on track when a performer looks at her prop and remembers what she was talking about. For the listening audience, props add visual context that makes performances more intelligible and interesting.

Any additional time a teacher spends demonstrating effective use of props, such as the importance of using posters that are easy for the audience to see, is time very well spent. Make it as convenient as possible for students to employ props. Provide students with markers, scissors, and poster paper. Additionally, offer to bring a CD player to class for students who would like to use music. Encourage the students to bring in their own materials. Many students will do this. If you are enthusiastic about their use, the students will get the idea.

Stipulating the minimum number of lines and words to be spoken by each performer is important. I always require the students to perform more lines than the required language functions necessitate. For example, in the previously described invitation SRP unit, students were required to include four language functions: a greeting, what they plan to do, a meeting place and a time to meet. By requiring additional lines—in the unit described, each student performer must speak at least seven lines—the students are forced to come up with original

language. Students often provide extra information or ask follow-up questions without being specifically asked to do so, in order to satisfy the length requirements. As previously stated, the SRPs are largely for recycling material; however, asking students to “stretch” a bit often leads to the additional advantage of novel language use.

Structured role-play requires students to work together with the same partner(s) for an extended period of time. Some teachers may avoid doing SRPs because they can be a logistical challenge in classes with students who are habitually late or absent. To help alleviate this problem, it may be a good idea to increase the penalty for each absence or tardy during the unit. Although a potential problem, it is this teacher’s experience that most students, even habitual offenders, come to class and come on time during the SRP unit. Students who may not be overly concerned about their own grade seem to feel obliged, nonetheless, to be in class for their partner’s sake.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this article, I contrasted structured role-play and regular role-play. To reiterate, structured role-play lacks the impromptu aspect that is associated with regular role-play. Structured role-play is a rehearsed performance. Some might argue that this is not role-play. But if we use Ladousse’s definition where “role” simply implies that students assume parts and “play” means “that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which *students are as inventive and playful as possible* [italics added]” (1987, p. 5), then the term applies well to the unit described above.

Students with novice-level English language proficiency do not have enough language at their command yet for the demands of impromptu speaking and performance. However, to preclude the use of role-play in novice-level classes because of this would be a mistake. All students can benefit from exposure to the inventive and playful aspects of role-play. Students who do not yet have a lot of speaking skills at their disposal are, however, more than capable of performing and being creative with the language if they are given proper support and time to prepare. Structured role-play is an excellent way of allowing students to personalize language use and be creative, while establishing a “safe,” structured environment for spoken-language learning success.

References

Ladousse, G.P. (1987). Role play. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Underhill, N. (1987). Testing spoken language: A handbook of testing techniques. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.