

ACTING OUT: HOW ROLE PLAY HELPS DEVELOP LANGUAGE AND SOFT SKILLS

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In the late 1970s, English teaching methodology shifted from the grammar-translation method to the communicative method that accentuates the significance of speaking practice and encourages interaction and the use of language in realistic scenarios. In ESP teaching, the communicative approach is motivated by the need of learners to converse in day-to-day or professional life. Within this approach, an effective technique to immerse students in real-life situations is role play. Being focused on the specific needs of learners, role play helps acquire a second language and develop soft skills in situations students understand and find interesting.

Soft skills are a set of non-specialized, ultra-professional competencies. Unlike professional competencies (hard skills), soft skills are not related to a specific field of human activity and encompass a range of personal traits, including effective communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making, time management, stress resistance, creativity, emotional intelligence, etc. Soft skills "allow people to respond more effectively to workplace situations, especially those involving interactions with others and/or a degree of personal judgment and sensitivity" (Schutt & Holloway & Linegar & Deman, 2017). Although soft skills are often considered intangible and difficult to measure, their impact on individual and organizational success is undeniable.

This article examines the effectiveness of role-play as a means of language and soft skills development, its functions, types, peculiarities as well as benefits for learners.

Yen, Huei, & Kuo (2013) define role play as a technique that centers on the learners' ability to speak and communicate by playing various roles in a genuine situation. According to Chen-jun (2006), role play is a learning activity that provides students with an opportunity to improve real-life spoken language in the classroom. Khaydarova (2018) believes that role play is a technique that helps students practice communicating in different social contexts and social roles. Ladousse (2004) elaborates on the definition,

stating that in "role play" the term "role" means that learners play a part (someone else's or their own), while "play" implies that the part is played in an atmosphere which facilitates learners' playfulness and inventiveness. In Richards and Rogers' opinion (2001), the term "role" does not only refer to the part learners are expected to play, but also to the social and interpersonal relationship between the participants. Jhaveri (2022) states that role play is a means of improving soft skills through situational awareness.

Role play is a simulation activity that involves the imitation of real-life situations. It is a communicative and interactive activity that enables learners to use language in context. In ESP teaching, role play provides learners with the opportunity to practice their language skills in authentic situations related to their field of study or profession. This approach facilitates the development of language proficiency and enhances learners' ability to communicate effectively in their respective domains.

Each role-play should contain specifications of aims, stages, problematic situations, participants' roles and functions, rules and assessment criteria.

Based on the degree of role play's flexibility, Byrne (1998), Harper-Whalen and Morris (2005) classify role plays into scripted, semi-scripted and unscripted.

- Scripted role play features a detailed script of what to say, what language to use or involves oral interpretation of a textbook dialogue.

- Semi-scripted role play features the semi-detailed script of the participants' actions and what language to use.

- Unscripted role play (also known as free role play or improvisation) enables learners to create their own dialogue; they are free to decide how to hold the conversation and what language to use.

In the majority of cases, the choice of the role-play type depends on the learners' language proficiency and experience. However, the more flexible role play is, the more creative, inventive, decisive, and playful its participants become.

In role-play, learners engage in informational, organizational, and communicative interaction.

- Informational interaction implies the exchange of information between the learners.

- Organizational interaction refers to cooperative problem-solving.

- Communicative interaction means that by acting out their roles, learners communicate in the target language.

The above-mentioned types of interaction develop learners' personalities and their soft skills as well. Role play brings learners out of their shells and motivates them to speak. It is considered a rehearsal where learners communicate in the middle of attention. The presence of peers helps learners boost self-confidence, and develop the ability to

work individually and in a team, conflict management, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, effective communication, and listening skills. Role play helps practice a wide range of vocabulary and syntactic structures in real-life and job-related situations. It enables learners to “integrate the newly acquired knowledge through actively seeking new and creative solutions, addressing different problems, exploring alternatives” (Kovacs, 2014).

Thus, role play is a teaching technique that has a variety of useful functions. They are:

- communicative (role play facilitates students' ability to communicate in real-life and professional situations);
- instructional (students learn to apply their language, professional and communicative skills);
- educational (role play teaches students to behave in a proper manner in real-life and job-related situations, to respect other students' opinions etc.);
- compensative (it makes up for the lack of communication in a real English language environment);
- entertaining (role play becomes a fun and enjoyable activity that arouses students' interest in English and technical disciplines);
- motivational (students not only enjoy the process of playing and learning, but they also realize the importance of the obtained knowledge in their real-life and future careers) (Kotkovets, 2016).

Serving a number of crucial functions, role play has several benefits. Firstly, it provides learners with a safe and controlled environment to practice their language skills. Students can experiment with language without the fear of making mistakes, which can lead to a more positive attitude toward language learning. Secondly, role play provides them with the opportunity to use language in context, which enhances their language acquisition and retention. Learners can relate the language they are learning to real-life situations, which facilitates the transfer of knowledge to practical use. Thirdly, role play encourages students to interact with their peers, which promotes collaborative learning and enhances learners' social skills.

Role play can also promote learners' critical thinking skills. Learners are required to think critically and make decisions based on the information presented to them in the role play scenario. This approach enables students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations and develop problem-solving skills, which are valuable in their future professions.

Role play can facilitate the development of learners' intercultural competence. Students can practice using language in different cultural contexts, which enables them

to understand and appreciate different cultures. This approach promotes empathy and tolerance, which are essential qualities for effective communication in today's globalized world.

To conclude, the benefits of role play in ESP teaching include enhancing second language acquisition and developing a range of soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, leadership, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, etc. Thus, role play can be a valuable tool in ESP teaching and educators should consider incorporating it into their teaching practices.

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