

## **ROLE PLAY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Role play is an effective learning and teaching experience for both the students and the teachers. Through role play, students can have more opportunities to "act" and "interact" with their peers trying to use the English language. It also helps learners in speaking, listening, and understanding English. It lightens the classroom atmosphere and enlivens it. This paper aims at investigating students' attitudes and perceptions of role play activities in the tertiary level English language classrooms in Bangladesh. The activity was chosen as a classroom task to create a situation for the learners to actively interact in English, and thereby to make the language learning more meaningful and interesting at the same time. The learners found the activities to be challenging as well as interesting. Finally, some recommendations are made to promote the use of role play in Bangladeshi classroom of English to develop communicative competence among the learners.*

**KEYWORDS:** Role Play, Communicative Competence, Peer Support

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### **INTRODUCTION**

With the beginning of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the emphasis is not only on linguistic competence of the language learners but also on the development of their communicative competence, that means, the ability to use language appropriately in actual communication. The teacher needs to create a scenario to teach the target language in a lively, interesting and active way so that the learners can develop their communicative ability effectively. Role play or simulation is one of the ways teachers can apply to facilitate the learners' ability to use the language appropriately in real life situation. Role play is classroom activities which reproduce or simulate real situations in the form of group discussion, dramatization, problem solving.

A new syllabus for class XI to XII that is the higher secondary level was introduced in Bangladesh in 2001 which attempted to follow the Communicative approach of language teaching. The syllabus of 2001 mainly focuses on the functional aspects of language use. It includes various tasks and activities that involve the learners to act as active learners to learn English. In spite of this communicative principle, very few students can communicate using English in their real life situation. So, even after passing the H.S.C examination, they come to the universities with a poor level in speaking. The current research tries to find out students' attitudes and perceptions of role play activities in the English language classroom at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Different researchers and linguists have defined role play in different ways and all of them have focused on the positive aspects of role play which facilitate the L2 learning.

“Role play is a way of bringing situations from real life into the classroom” (Doff 1990, 232). It may also include plays, dramas, sociodramas, and simulation. In role play, students need to imagine a role, a context, or both and improvise a conversation. The context is usually determined, but students develop the dialogue as they proceed (Doff, 232). This differs from reading a dialogue aloud. In this sense, the cue card variation to dialogues could also fit under the umbrella category of role play.

Ladousse (1987) thinks that role play uses different communicative techniques and develops fluency in the language, promotes interaction in the classroom and increases motivation. Here peer learning is encouraged and sharing of responsibility between teacher and the learner in the learning process takes place.

Larsen-Freeman (1986) explains that role plays, whether structured or less structured, are important in the communicative approach because they give learners an opportunity to practise communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles. According to Brown (2001), "role-play minimally involves (a) giving a role to one or more members of a group and (b) assigning an objective or purpose that participants must accomplish." Brown suggested role-play can be conducted with a single person, in pairs or in groups, with each person assigned a role to accomplish an objective. (p.183).

McCaslin (1995) introduced role play as having the following characteristics:

It (role play) refers to the assuming of a role for the particular value it may have to the participant, rather for the development of an art...Role playing is what the young child does in a dramatic play, but it is also a tool used by psychologists and play therapists. According to Richard Courtney (1974), "Play, acting and thought are interrelated. They are mechanisms by which the individual tests reality, gets rid of his anxieties, and masters his environment." (p.177)(p.10)

There are many benefits of using role play. Furness (1976) stated that a child can enjoy and profit from a role play experience "in terms of improved communication skills, creativity, increased social awareness, independent thinking, verbalization of opinions, and development of values and appreciation of the art of drama."(p.19) He provided seventeen advantages of role-play.

Stern (1983) suggested "role playing helps the individual to become more flexible" and "develop a sense of mastery in many situations". (p. 213) She suggested "through role play, L2 learners can experience many kinds of situations in which they will use the language; and as they develop a sense of mastery in them, they should be able to apply the language more easily to new situations." (p.213)

From different studies and research works, it may be considered that a role play is a highly flexible learning activity which has a wide scope for variation and imagination. Role play can improve learners' speaking skills in any situation, and helps learners to interact. The shy learners are also benefited by role play activities which help them to overcome shyness and urge them to speak. In addition, it is fun and most learners will agree that enjoyment leads to better learning.

## **Research Questions**

This research studies students' perceptions of the role play activities by investigating the following questions:

1. How beneficial do students believe role play activities to be?
2. What kind of peer support do students provide each other?
3. What kind of instructor support is beneficial for role play activities?
4. How did students' English speaking ability improve from participation in role play activities?

## **Research Hypothesis:**

The researcher assumed that role play activities would prepare the students for real life communication. They would learn how to use English for real purpose. They would believe that role play activities will help them to be fluent in speaking English.

Another hypothesis was that working with partners or groups would be beneficial as they will interact with each other. They could provide suggestions to each other when any of them faced problems.

The research was based on another hypothesis that is, if the instructor would give suggestions and carefully explain the tasks with examples before learners engage themselves with role play activities then it would be a great support for them to have confidence and they would know what is expected of them.

Finally it was assumed that students' might improve speaking in English through role play activities. Through acting out different roles, they would be more confident in their speaking ability in English.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

For the purpose of this study, 40 students of two different groups were used as sample. They were doing the same course with the same instructor (the researcher) from BBA and EEE departments at United International University, Dhanmondi, Dhaka. Both of the classes comprised of mixed level of learners. The courses titled *Composition and Communication Skills* for the BBA students and *English II* for the EEE students mainly aimed at improving students' analytic reading and writing skills. At the same time, practicing listening and speaking skills were given equal emphasis so that they could be able to develop communicative competence.

### **Instruments used for data collection:**

The instruments used in this study included i) Role play activity and ii) Questionnaire for the students. The instruments were constructed in accordance with the purposes of the study. Role play activity was chosen as one of the tasks to create a situation for the learners to

actively interact in the language, thereby making the language learning more meaningful. As the main objectives of this research were to investigate students' attitude towards role play activity, the questionnaires were set to find out those reasons. The items in the questionnaire asked the learners to provide written feedback after they had done the role play activity. Some instruments were prepared following the previous instruments used by other researchers in similar kinds of research.

### Procedures:

The students performed the role play activities in five classes. In the first four classes, they had just participated in different types of role play activities in pairs and in groups. Finally in the fifth class, they have performed the activities and after the activity students were asked to provide written feedback based on the questionnaire. First, they were given different topics to act out the role play activities. They selected their partners for role play. They were given fixed time to discuss with their partners for preparation. When the students were getting

prepared through discussing about the topics, the instructor ( the researcher) monitored them and helped all the pairs by giving necessary vocabulary for the role play, by encouraging them to speak English. Then they performed the role play activities in front of the whole class. The students were given the following topics to do role play:

Conversation between –i. a customer and a shopkeeper in a shopping center, ii. A teacher and a student about a problem, iii. two friends at the university campus , iv. A customer and a waiter in a restaurant, v. two friends who met after a long time, vi. A doctor and a patient, vii. An employer and an employee, viii. Two neighbors introducing each other, ix. A flat owner and a tenant about a problem, x. a journalist and a famous scientist.

The above topics were given for pair work. For group performance students were divided into several groups and they were asked to do role play on the following topic:

Think, some of you are the members of a band in Bangladesh. Others are journalists who are going to interview the band. When you are ready, have the interview.

### Methods of data analysis:

After collecting the data, it was analyzed to have the findings. Then the findings were compared with the research questions and the hypotheses. To analyze the data, the results of the students' questionnaire were presented in percentage using a table and then all the results were analyzed in an integrative way to have a holistic idea about role play activities among the students at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

**Table: 1**

Questions	Yes	No	Comments
1. Do you think it was a help having a partner? Was it a help or a disturbance or nothing at all?	86.11%	13.89%	
2. Did your partner give any kind of help?	88.8%	11.2%	
3. Did you give any kind of suggestion to your partner? If yes, write comments on that.	72.2%	27.8%	

4. Did the role play activity help improving your conversational ability? How? Give comments.	94.4%	5.6%	
5. Do you think role play activities developed your fluency in speaking English?	91.6%	8.4%	
6. Do you think you have improved your English pronunciation and vocabulary through role play activity?	83.3%	16.7%	
7. Do you think role play activities helped you to learn how to speak in a real situation?	94.4%	5.6%	
8. Do you think you felt shy to speak English before you do this type of role play?	58.3%	41.7%	
9. Have you overcome your shyness after your participation in the role play activity?	58.3%	41.7%	
10. Were the activities interesting? If yes, give your opinion.	86.11%	13.89%	
11. Were the activities challenging? If yes, give your opinion.	66.6%	33.4%	
12. Do you think your instructor's support was helpful to you while doing the activities?	100%	0%	
13. What kind support do you expect from your course instructor? Write the comment.	100%	0%	

### Results of the students' questionnaire

**Discussion on the Results:** This questionnaire was set to find out the students' opinions about peer support, role play activities and what type of support they expect from their instructor before and while doing role play activities in the classroom. The results have been discussed below:

In answer to question no.1, 86.11% of the students replied that they were benefited having a partner at the time of doing role play activities. Only 13.89% students had a negative response to this question. As the students could write their comment in the questionnaire, some of the students replied that having a partner helped them in building confidence, it was easy to discuss with the classmate, and partner gave better concept about how to do the role play using English. In addition, through discussion they got experience of real event.

In answer to question no.2, 88% students agreed that they got help from their speaking partners. Only 11.2% of them replied 'no.' The participants opined that their partners helped them providing necessary vocabulary, new ideas, and information about the topics for role play. In addition, their partners co-operated them very well for every situation to do the performance in English. While answering question no.3, 72.2% students said that they had suggested to their partners while sharing ideas about the topics. Some of them suggested their partners to make the conversation better. Some of them opined that they had suggested their

classmates by sharing the whole idea of the performance, by encouraging the classmates so that they may not get nervous. On the other hand, 27.8% of the students answered 'no.'

The questions from no. 4 -11 investigated the students' attitudes and perceptions about the role play activities in the English classroom. In answer to question no. 4, 94.4% of the respondents said that the role play activities helped improving their conversational ability and only 5.6% of them replied 'no.' In the written comment, they opined that role play activity provided them the chance to practice conversation in English, it helped improving their speaking and it helped them to know different situations what they in real life. Some other students said that the activity was effective for their presentation skills and they learned how to communicate in English.

While answering question no.5, 91.6% of the students agreed that they had developed their fluency in speaking English through role play activities. On the other hand, a few of them (8.4% ) said 'no.' In the series of comments the students mentioned that some of them were very poor in speaking English and after the role play activities they were improving fluency in speaking English. Question no.6 was about the importance of role play in improving students' English pronunciation and vocabulary. 83% of the students replied that they had learned some new words while they were having discussion before they perform the role play and as they had to perform in English they felt that they have lacking in English vocabulary and correct pronunciation. Very few of them (16.7%) of the students replied in the negative.

Question no. 7 was about the significance of role play activities in promoting the learners to speak English in a real situation. Almost all, 99.4% of the respondents replied that the role play activities provided the opportunity of how to interact with others in a real situation using English. On the other hand, only 5.6% of the students said 'no.' In answer to question nos.8 and 9, 58.3% of them answered that they have overcome their shyness, more or less, after they have performed the activities in the class. While 41.7% of the students replied that they did not feel shy to speak English in front of their teachers and classmates.

Question nos. 10 and 11 dealt with how much the learners felt it interesting and challenging to do role play activity in English in the classroom. 86% of them replied that the activities were interesting while 13.89% replied in the negative. Moreover, 66.6% students found the activities challenging and 33.4% thought that it was not challenging to them. Some of them opined that the role play activity was interesting as it was a break from text study and they have enjoyed a lot while doing role play. Then communicating in English was really interesting to them. Some of them enjoyed it as they felt drama-like situation in the class. The learners had also written several comments on how much challenging it was for them to perform role play. Some of them mentioned that speaking in front of their teacher and all classmates were quite challenging as they had to do acting, speak English, prepare correct sentence structures and find out proper vocabulary.

Question nos. 12 and 13 focused on the instructor's role in the class at the time of students' performance of role play. In answer to both of the questions, 100% of the students replied that the course instructor's support was very helpful for them while doing the activities. They also replied that they expect their instructor's support for doing the role play activities in the class. Most of them had written comments that the instructor should suggest them, give them necessary vocabulary, and correct their sentences before acting out different roles. Then, some others expressed that the instructor should be friendly and helpful so that they can overcome nervousness of speaking English.

### **Findings of the students' questionnaire:**

The findings regarding the students' attitude and perceptions of role play activities in the English classroom at the tertiary level were like the following:

Students believed that role play activities were beneficial to them as they developed their conversational ability, fluency, vocabulary in English after they had done the role play activities in the classroom. Most important, they learned how to speak English in a real situation. Scarcella and Crookall(1900) said that when learners actively involved in a language, it facilitates to acquire that language. As the learners were active and they had to perform in the target language, it was helpful for them to many things about English.

Students found that working with partners or groups was helpful. They got suggestions from their partners when they faced difficulty about vocabulary, about how to speak English, or any type of information that they needed for role play activity. They have also learned how to interact with others in a real situation. Hurt *et al* ( 1978) opined that affinity is often the desired outcome of communication between people, as there is an inner need among learners to foster warm relationships. So, when the students worked with their partners, they were effective in communicating English.

The students' self-assessments revealed that they improved and became more confident in speaking English after they had participated in several role play activities in the classroom.

### **How to promote the use of role play in a Bangladeshi classroom:**

The following can help us promoting role play among the learners at the tertiary level in a Bangladeshi classroom:

i. The teachers should be trained how to utilize role play purposefully and effectively. Training and ingraining must include subscribing to the principles of learning so that role play is not mere unplanned but meets specific pedagogical goals.

ii. As learners are frequently evaluated by their cognitive ability that means, their performance in examinations, the other aspects of development such as the psychomotor and affective states are often ignored. For this reason, the learners are not adequately exposed to experiential communicative activities and consequently they are found reticent and passive in the classroom when they are asked to communicate orally. So, learners must be given more opportunities to speak their thoughts freely. Teachers should take the responsibility to make a change in the classrooms as pointed out by Tedick and Walker (1994): "It is the responsibility of individuals working as a collective network to confront their beliefs and to be willing to embrace the challenges and begin to work toward substantive, lasting change". (p.309)

iii. Teachers should give the chance to the learners so that they can choose their own partners and group members while working with role play for the success in the lesson. Otherwise teacher's interference in assigning group members may be less effective and even harmful. Thus, the introvert learners will be able to overcome shyness and gain speaking fluency.

iv. To make the students more receptive towards role play, the teacher can identify the weak, passive learners and motivate them by giving regular activities, so that they will not be

backward as they think about themselves. For this purpose, workshops can be arranged at all levels of learning to help developing confidence at the time of speaking.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that role play activity in a language classroom in Bangladesh is an effective technique to improve the learners' speaking ability in English at the tertiary level. Through this type of activity, they can interact with their peers in the target language. Moreover, role play activity helps them to learn how to use English in a real situation in a Bangladeshi context. In this sense, role play becomes one of the ways to develop communicative competence among the tertiary level students in Bangladesh. Therefore, the language teachers of Bangladesh should apply this teaching technique in the classrooms so that the students can develop confidence in using English in their practical life.

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**APPENDIX A (QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE STUDENTS)**

This questionnaire is prepared to collect your opinion regarding role play activity in the class. Put tick marks wherever appropriate. You need not write your name. You can write your opinion in the comment box.

Questions	Yes	No	Comments
1. Do you think it was a help having a partner? Was it a help or a disturbance or nothing at all?			
2. Did your partner give any kind of help?			
3. Did you give any kind of suggestion to your partner? If yes, write comments on that.			
4. Did the role play activity help improving your conversational ability? How? Give comments.			
5. Do you think role play activities developed your fluency in speaking English?			
6. Do you think you have improved your English pronunciation and vocabulary through role play activity?			
7. Do you think role play activities helped you to learn how to speak in a real situation?			
8. Do you think you felt shy to speak English before you do this type of role play?			
9. Have you overcome your shyness after your participation in the role play activity?			
10. Were the activities interesting? If yes, give your opinion.			
11. Were the activities challenging? If yes, give your opinion.			
12. Do you think your instructor's support was helpful to you while doing the activities?			
13. What kind support do you expect from your course instructor? Write the comment.			