Online Role-plays: Combining Situational and Interactional Authenticity in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract. Role-plays have been almost ubiquitous in foreign language classes and their potential has been widely recognised. In the last decade, the dissemination of Web 2.0 has created a wide range of possibilities for this type of activity, including conducting online role-plays between institutions, the opportunity to combine synchronous and asynchronous communication tools and also articulate online with face-to-face interactions. Online role-plays are first and foremost a social process in which knowledge is emergent resulting from interactions between participants. It is also an activity that mirrors contextualised everyday situations and students are faced with new information, promoting research and reflection, thus enhancing autonomy. Within a dialogical and dialectical perspective of English language learning, the following research question was developed: how can online role-plays in English language learning in higher education be integrated in order to enhance the development of communicative competence? In order to answer the research question, an action research project was carried out, according to the model proposed by Stringer (2007), and an online role-play was implemented over six weeks in the English II course unit from the degree in Tourism at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Portugal.

Keywords: EFL, interactional authenticity, online role-play, situational authenticity.

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1.   Introduction

Role-plays have been very popular in the foreign language classroom in order to simulate situations from the real world. Web 2.0 technologies have meant a lot of opportunities for expanding and enriching traditional role-plays, since they provide a scenario that enhances dialogue between participants assuming specific roles who will have to negotiate and discuss different perspectives in order to collaboratively create a common output. According to Wills, Leigh and Ip (2011):

> "Role plays are situations in which learners take on the role profiles of specific characters or representatives of organisations in a contrived setting. Role play is designed primarily to build first person experience in a safe and supportive environment. Much of the learning occurs because the learning design requires learners to explore and articulate viewpoints that may not be their own" (p. 2).

We can then say that online role-plays enhance discussion, dialogue and negotiation between participants, who assume specific roles with the ultimate goal of collaboratively creating something new. Recently, the EnROLE Project (Wills, Rosser, Devonshire, Leigh, Russel, & Shephard, 2009), which was developed in Australia with the intention of promoting the use of online role-plays in higher education, highlighted the following aspects:

- online role-plays are designed to increase understanding of real-life interaction and dynamics;

- participants assume the role of someone in a specific situation;

- participants undertake authentic activities in authentic contexts;

- tasks involve in-role interaction and negotiation with other participants/roles;

- interaction between participants is mostly conducted in an online environment;

- final outputs should create opportunities for reflection.

Designing an online role-play is, undoubtedly, a complex and challenging task and encompasses three main elements from the learner's perspective: tasks to be

done; resources, namely the adopted scenario, role descriptions and background readings; and support processes, that might involve scaffolding for team work, access to real world professionals and a moderator.

As far as tasks are concerned, Wills et al. (2011) distinguish between six complementary stages, known as the "6 Rs":

- enRole – students familiarise themselves with their role;

- Research – students gather information about their role and its social entourage;

- wRite – students share their role written profile;

- React – students share and discuss different viewpoints by interacting with other roles;

- Resolve – students attempt to reach a shared resolution to the proposed task;

- Reflection – students debrief about what has occurred and about what they have learned.

Regarding materials, students might be assigned some additional reading or encouraged to explore different links in order to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Wills et al. (2011) state that:

> "Materials need to support not only the content of the role play but also its process. They must also provide multiple perspectives supporting different possible solutions […]. Learners must be provided with more materials than they need, to force reliance on choices based on assessment of relevance" (p. 77).

The planning and design of rules and roles should be carefully considered by the moderator, who will need to consider aspects such as the distribution and use of power, the division of labour amongst participants, the relationship between the different roles and decision making. The role and functions of the moderator depend mainly on the learning objectives and the scope and design of the role-play. In line with this, Leigh and Rosser (2008) highlighted a need to adjust monitoring to the different phases of the role-play. The authors distinguish between four phases:

- Pre-play phase – at this stage it is crucial to be able to engage and motivate students, familiarising them with the online environment that will support the activity. It is also important to announce the start point and define the final outcome.

- Early stage – understanding roles and ensuring a fair distribution of work among participants is crucial for the success of the role-play. The moderator should make sure that the scenario, environment and functions have been fully understood.

- Development stage – will be the backbone of the role-play and, at this stage, the moderator should make sure students pursue the role-play agenda. It might be necessary to encourage participation or maintain focus.

- Final stage – it is a moment of reflection, disengagement and assessment, sharing experiences and evaluating the degree of achievement of objectives.

2. Method

The methodological approach adopted for this study consisted of an action research project over six weeks, adapted from Stringer (2007), in the English II course unit from the degree course in Tourism at the School of Technology and Management, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu. This study seeks to provide an answer to the following question: how to use online role-plays in English language learning in higher education in order to enhance the development of communicative competence?

Stemming from this question, there are two main objectives:

- Harnessing the potential of online role-plays in the teaching and learning of English in higher education.

- Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of using online role-plays in English language learning for the collaborative construction of knowledge in higher education.

Students organised into groups and assuming specific roles had to organise a visit to London for a group of 25 students. Table 1 presents a general overview of the activity.

Table 1.   Overview of the role-play "A Trip to London"

Roles	19 roles (managed by 8 groups: 2 travel agencies; 3 airline companies; a students' representative; an events planning company; Word Travel Market) The moderator allocated students to the different groups Assignment of roles within each group made by students Generic role (job / function) Pair work (crucial to pull into the action) Collaborative work (essential for communication between roles)
Learning goals	Develop proposals related to different aspects of organising a trip to London Develop capabilities for planning a trip with Web tools and services Develop connections with different roles and nodes to ensure effective collaboration to achieve specific goals
Moderator's role	Moderator (according to Leigh & Spindler, 2003): Process planning Orchestrating action, assigning weekly tasks to the different groups Monitoring action Drawing out main learning points
Students involved	33 students (2 shifts)
Duration	6 weeks (April 26th to June 1st). Blended learning: Tasks started on Tuesday in class and students continued online till the following Monday.
Virtual environment	Grouply, a social network that allows the construction of virtual learning communities. From the tools available, it was expected that students used the following: News - for communication within groups Events - used by the moderator to publicise the weekly task Chat - for communication within groups. Forum - for inquiries and submission of weekly reflections. Blog - for proposals within the working group and the discussion on the role of students Subgroups - for managing the personal space of each group as well as the information received from the different roles Photos, videos and files - for information management
Output	Detailed travel plan of a trip to London for the entire class, including a visit to the World Travel Market
Data collection tools	Weekly reflections from students Focus group Direct observation Linguistic analysis of written productions

3.   Discussion

Although the participation of different groups was not homogeneous, all accomplished at least part of the tasks they had been assigned. However, it should be noted that the activity took place almost exclusively face-to-face, since,

whenever a group did not finish the task in class, the work was not completed until next class. Another fact worth mentioning is that in addition to the tasks issued by the researcher, roles took the initiative to establish additional contacts with other stakeholders in the role-play, in particular to thank, make complaints, or even to accelerate the process of sending information.

In their weekly reflections, students stressed the fact that this activity allowed them to get to know more about English culture and also the situational authenticity that enhanced research and, consequently, reading in English. On the other hand, reading comprehension and selecting information were reported as the main difficulties.

A thorough analysis of the 42 emails produced during the role-play reveal that most emails include a wide range of words and expressions related to the tourism industry (flights, accommodation, luggage policy, tourist attractions). However, regarding vocabulary control, it can be said that there were problems regarding word choice (in most cases influenced by their native language), but which did not hinder communication. About grammatical accuracy, some mistakes occurred, mostly associated with orthography and punctuation. The majority of the emails show concern about the use of linguistic markers of social conventions and also about politeness conventions. Students were also able to adapt their discourse to different types of communicative functions (inform, enquire, complain) and got familiar with email writing structures and conventions.

In the final focus group interviews students mentioned the quality of the output, which was only possible because each role focused on a specific part of the whole. They also reported the likelihood of the activity, which anticipated their working life, thus enhancing commitment and motivation. Moreover, students were more concerned with the appropriateness and accuracy of their written productions. The use of online translation tools was the main strategy used to overcome written comprehension and production problems. It should be mentioned that students lacked strategic competence to use these tools and, mostly in written production, students wrote emails in Portuguese first and then acritically simply copied the result of the translation.

4.   Conclusions

The use of online role-plays in foreign language learning proved to be very positive because, in addition to increasing motivation, it also allowed students to get in contact with a rich and varied input in English, stimulating reading and autonomous

exploration of these resources and improving their communicative competence. Students also felt the need to engage themselves, conducting research in the English language in order to be able to respond to the challenges posed, implying research, critical analysis and selection of information skills. These capabilities are of utmost importance in the current educational context. Contact with authentic materials also contributed to the development of a critical cultural awareness, including familiarisation with patterns, routines, behaviours and customs of a given community, a key aspect to building a democratic society.

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