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Using Replacement Performance Role-Plays in the Language Classroom

As a language learner, I did not care much for role-plays in the classroom. Like many students, I was shy when it came to performing in front of others. I dreaded the task of memorizing a dialogue to deliver. I couldn't decide which was worse: committing a simple textbook dialogue to memory or being put into pairs and told to create a dialogue that we would have to perform. I felt a combined sense of anxiety: writer's block and stage fright! Not only did we need to come up with an interesting story line, but we also had to write the dialogue using particular vocabulary or structure and then memorize what we wrote. We would spend so much time thinking of a story line that the dialogue suffered. And how could I memorize the lines so quickly?

To me, this type of activity did not seem to be a very valuable use of class time; nor did it seem a good way to become proficient in the target language. Often groups were so busy thinking, preparing, or simply worrying about their own upcoming performance that they did not pay attention to the group performing in front of the class. As students, we were indeed practicing the language, but was the effort we exerted worth what we got in return?

Some teachers realize that the students not performing need a listening task to keep them from working on their own dialogues or simply to keep them focused on the performing students. The usual listening tasks are watching for classmates' mistakes, selecting the best performance, or answering comprehension questions.

Role-plays have come a long way from how they were used in my early language learning days in the late '70s. In recent years, many articles and books (Gower, Phillips, and Walters 1995, Harmer 1996, Kodototchigova 2002, Sharim-Paz 1993) have mentioned the benefits of using role-plays: getting less talkative students to speak in class, improving communicative

competence and fluency, promoting cooperative learning, promoting understanding about norms of other cultures, and providing practice for real-life experiences.

For students, role-plays have been touted as fun and motivational because they allow students to be creative and express themselves. However, sometimes a blank slate or little to no direction can in fact block one's creativity. Providing a function or scene for students to write a role-play about (introducing a friend, ordering at a restaurant, asking for directions) is a nice step away from memorizing pre-fab dialogues, but even that task is a bit predictable and bland (Malay and Duff 1994).

Another approach has been to give learners some direction with cue cards that include background information regarding the character, the scene, and the goal of the interaction. (Gower, Phillips, and Walters 1995, Ur 1999). This role-play format increases student-to-student interaction in the classroom and a need for students to pay closer attention to each another during the activity. Giving all students an opportunity to practice speaking is a standard goal of most language classes. However, in order to monitor student progress in a simultaneous role-play activity, the teacher needs to move from pair to pair, stopping only briefly to observe the student exchange for common errors in pronunciation, word choice, and grammatical structure (Rodrigues and White 1993). In a large class, getting around to every group before the students have finished the interchange may be difficult to impossible.

One way to make monitoring student participation easier—and to engage student interest, put shy learners at ease, and provide valuable real-world practice for language development—is to use what I call Replacement Performance role-play. Replacement Performance role-play not only can help increase student comfort levels, it can also promote pragmatic competence and help develop critical thinking skills.

In a Replacement Performance role-play, students are naturally engaged. Students view a scene—acted out by persons in the classroom or on a videotape—that has a provoking incident. This does not mean that the scene itself is highly controversial or is about a divisive topic, but that the scene, or the ending of the scene, will initiate discussion amongst students. The scene should prompt the audience members to comment on some aspect of the story line: the resolution of the situation, the advice offered, or a particular character's words or actions. Teachers should capitalize on the discussion that naturally occurs and should ask students their opinions of the scene, the resolution, the advice, and so on.

After discussing the scene, students prepare to replace a character in the scene to demonstrate what they would say or do differently if they were in the same situation, faced with the same circumstances. The students are encouraged to rewrite the lines or message of *one* of the characters and see how that might change the outcome of the scene. The one character for whom they write the lines is replaced and the other characters remain. Depending on how the replacement character role is performed and what the character says, the scene can advance in different directions.

Advantages

This interactive approach to role-plays in the language learning classroom has advantages that naturally negate the challenges most role-plays cause: writer's block, stage fright, and observation tasks for spectators. In this type of role-play, students have a natural impulse to respond. This inclination to create a dialogue is in response to what appears to be a here and now situation—a situation they observe, not one they piece together from cards or a description. Students witness a situation, react to the outcome delivered in the performance, and are roused to offer their version of a character's dialogue to show how those lines might affect the outcome. In this way they are engaged in the activity.

Whole class participation

Perhaps because they are so engaged, shyer students are more likely to suspend their stage fright in order to participate and offer their contribution. Language learners reading this can probably remember a time when their need to speak and say what was on their mind superseded their timid nature. Even if their need to speak is not strong enough to bring them to the front of the class, this interactive role-play can easily allow students less inclined to perform to give their opinion in a smaller group setting.

Integrated observation task

With this approach, observation tasks are automatic. If the story line is absorbing, the need to react or respond is inevitable. The task of observing is not seen as a chore, but more as entertainment or problem solving. Students can select a character for whom to substitute dialogue, and these lines then change the course of the story. Writing and speaking become powerful tools.

Varying proficiency levels

Students of several proficiency levels can take part and benefit from the interaction that Replacement Performance role-play brings to the classroom. Even if the lower level learners are not as fluent in their target language development, the activity can (and should) build in a step where the class is divided into groups and students brainstorm as a group ways to rewrite the message of a particular character. They can then write the altered dialogue together, naturally exposing the lower level students to language practice.

At times, the lower level student may not be the shy student and he or she may be eager to perform the altered dialogue. Or perhaps the lower level student can perform with minimal lines and additional gestures. Any kind of involvement builds confidence and self-esteem for students, leading to increased assurance and eagerness to participate in the language classroom.

Besides being suitable for several proficiency levels, this interactive approach to role-play is good for developing pragmatic competence and increasing critical thinking skills.

Pragmatic practice

A natural benefit of most role-plays is the practice they provide in developing pragmatic competence. In short, pragmatic competence goes beyond grammatical competence and refers to speaking appropriately for the context. This is the knowledge of knowing when to use formal or informal speech, what variation in tone and intonation might mean, and even the integration of hesitation markers in conversation.

Unfortunately, many classes concentrate on achieving accurate grammatical competence at the expense of attaining appropriateness. A study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) indicated that both EFL learners and their teachers believed grammatical errors were more serious than pragmatic errors. Interestingly, the opposite held true for ESL learners and their teachers; they ranked pragmatic errors to be more serious.

Perhaps these opposing results relate to what students feel they will be doing with the language: ESL students may have more interaction in the language than EFL students, or perhaps their instructors predict this will be the case. Either way, an awareness of pragmatic knowledge should be raised. Students need to know that not only what they say, but how they say it, packs meaning; some of it is perhaps unintentional.

Pragmatic competence or awareness requires more than discreet exercises. Replacement Performance role-plays can help develop this pragmatic competence or at least raise awareness of different expressions for greeting, leave taking, apologizing, etc. As mentioned above, use of intonation, stress, and hesitation might affect the direction or tone of a conversation. For example, in the following context, the use of stress can alter the meaning of an utterance. Imagine a situation in which a teacher suspects a student of dishonesty on a test because she found a cheat sheet. She might pick up the cheat sheet and ask the simple question "Is this yours?" with no emphatic stress. This could be interpreted as an honest question seeking information. Alternatively, she could draw out the last word with stress ("Is this YOURS?"), which would make the question accusatory in meaning. This added stress changes the tone of the conversation and could then affect the response from the interlocutor. These finer points of conversation management could all be addressed using Replacement Performance role-play.

Critical thinking skills

In some language classes critical thinking skills are overlooked when instructors concentrate on having students memorize verb forms, vocabulary, and grammar rules. At times, teachers even have students commit full-length dialogues to memory. However, as any language learner who has used the target language outside the classroom knows, this memorized information is not typically sufficient for real sustained communication. Memorized dialogue lines will only work to a certain point in authentic interactions. One must be able to

use critical thinking skills to respond to situations with creative combinations of language and an understanding of appropriateness.

Critical thinking skills are most commonly talked about with reference to Bloom's Taxonomy (www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/bloom.html), which was first developed over 50 years ago. In Bloom's Taxonomy, thinking is categorized into levels: from the easiest (knowledge which is often memorized facts or information) to the most difficult (evaluation of a situation using subjectivity and justifying support). In between these two extreme thinking skills are *comprehension, application, analysis,* and *synthesis,* in that order. As mentioned above, many language classes focus on the lowest levels of thinking: *knowledge* and *comprehension*. While that is the place to start, the reality is that students who will use the language in a target culture, outside the classroom, will need the more advanced skills in their repertoire.

Higher order thinking skills are necessary for this activity to succeed. Of course students need to be familiar with, or know, the topic and comprehend the role-play in order to employ the more advanced thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, but with the visuals and audio of the role-play, the knowledge and comprehension part comes quite easily.

For the Replacement Performance activity, students use the *application* skill by working to solve a problem, to change or communicate part of the role-play in a way that suits their intended outcome. In *analyzing*, students separate out the parts from the whole or identify the different characters and see the patterns of their behavior. Analyzing in this way helps students devise new dialogue for a character in the scene.

Synthesizing will be a natural progression after students have analyzed the characters in the role-play. Students need to predict what characters might do based on how they revise the dialogue. They will draw conclusions of how their new dialogue may affect a scene based on what they know about the characters of the scene up to that point.

Evaluation is the most advanced thinking skill in Bloom's Taxonomy. This step will also be automatic because as students observe the role-plays, they will inevitably discern the effect the fresh dialogues have on the outcome of the role-play.

In such an interactive activity where students join in, most of these thinking skills occur instantly with little prompting. It becomes great practice in problem solving in general and choosing appropriate, specific language that can be applied in real situations.

Creating and using interactive role-play

The basic steps of Replacement Performance role-play are outlined below, with a sample role-play to illustrate each step of the activity.

Select a situation

Choose a real-life situation that requires a decision to be made or an opinion to be expressed. It should be something with which students are familiar or can easily imagine. The situation should involve two to four characters and could involve more depending on the scene and the nature of the topic. Situations will differ depending on the context in which English is being taught, but some possibilities are:

- a student asking to cheat off of a classmate during an exam;
- an adult not having enough money to take a bus or subway home;
- a parent having to break up an argument between siblings;
- someone cutting into line at a bus stop, grocery store, airport, etc.;
- a driver hitting another car, but only a young child saw the accident;
- a taxi driver finding an envelope of money after dropping off a passenger.

Write

This step is critical, but flexible. The scene needs to be simple, to the point, and probably should not last more than ten minutes; however, details should not be left out if they contribute to the predicament of the story. If we take the first example in the list of situations above, the scene could include the details described below.

Situation: A student asking to cheat off of a classmate during an exam.

Characters: Three characters minimum—two students (Student A and Student B); one teacher.

The scene:

Two students are on their way to an exam, discussing their readiness for it.

Student A indicates that s/he might need to cheat and flashes a small piece of paper with information for the test (a "cheat sheet").

The students enter the classroom and get settled.

The teacher announces the exam and how much time students will have to complete it, and then distributes the papers.

Student A obviously feels the need to cheat and tries various covert ways (looking at Student B's paper and referring to the cheat sheet).

Student A gets the answers, finishes up the test, and accidentally drops the cheat sheet while leaving the room. It falls to the floor nearest Student B.

The teacher finds the cheat sheet and then starts to question Student B about cheating.

This scene is quite simple, so those acting in it could easily memorize the movements and dialogue or meaning within the role-play and can perform it over and over with little to no prompting (see the Appendix for a sample dialogue for this scene). The scene also does not need many props. In the situation above, two desks or two chairs next to each other would suffice. (Of course, props may differ, depending on the context within which this role-play is used and the availability of props.)

Recruit

The recruitment part is also flexible in that it does not so much matter who performs the role-play. It could be outsiders helping (other native speakers, teachers, colleagues), good students in the class, or any students who would feel comfortable with memorizing a few lines or functions of the dialogue and delivering them. In this way, the role-play is adaptable for different levels. Using students from your own class is ideal as they are then already getting involved. They become a part of the demonstration and therefore more students get practice overall.

Remember, in this interactive role-play, after the scene is performed, a learner steps in and substitutes for one of the characters. This "replacement" character is encouraged to change the original character's lines to demonstrate just how he would handle himself were he to find himself in the same situation. Alternatively, students could be encouraged to just demonstrate another way to handle the situation, not necessarily their own viewpoint. In fact, for an extension, the teacher could ask students to take on a character by using certain personality features. For example, one could play the offending student either as a first time cheater or as an expert con artist. The classmate could be one who protects her cheating friend or one who finds it impossible to lie about the owner of the cheat sheet.

Depending on the dialogue and the scene, students of different proficiency levels can easily participate. More advanced students might be a better choice for those characters whose roles will likely need to respond to the "new" character. Less proficient students might be more comfortable playing a character that will be replaced by an audience member. Alternatively, a scene might be written to include a non-verbal role for a less proficient student.

Practice

As the role-play is quite short, a lot of practice may not be necessary. However, for best results, it is preferable to have the actors memorize the meaning or function and perhaps even actual lines to be delivered. The characters may need to deliver their lines several times before they alter them in response to the new dialogue of the replaced character.

Stages of the role-play

Before the original performance

In using this type of role-play in class for the first time, the teacher can choose to introduce the story with varying levels of information to give students some schema (helpful for lower levels) or only introduce the activity associated with it—the Replacement Performance part. To do the latter, the teacher could say something similar to:

Now we will watch a short role-play on the subject of cheating on exams. Please watch the role-play and think about how you might respond differently if you were any of the characters in the scene.

During the original performance

During the role-play itself, it is expected students will be concentrating on the story line and the messages in the dialogues. Depending on the comprehension of the students, there might need to be a repeat performance. The dialogue is short, so time could be built in for a repeat performance. Many listening activities are repeated for the students in a language classroom, so why not repeat the role-play? Students in the audience will grasp the situation better the second time, and those in the role-play will get another chance to perform and get comfortable delivering their lines.

After the original performance

At the end of the role-play, the instructor can lead the learners in a focused reflection about the situation they just viewed. The point of such an activity is to prompt students to think about the scene depicted in the role-play, but not necessarily voice their opinions or ideas in front of the whole class. At least not yet. While the role-play could be an excellent point of departure for a discussion about the predicament featured in the scene, having students jump in, replace a character, and substitute his/her dialogue would be another type of practice with the language. They would no longer be talking *about* what they would say; they would simply say it. In fact, talking about what one "would say" requires a more advanced grammar structure and may be beyond the learners' ability at this point.

The focused reflection activity could be organized along the lines of a think-pair-share activity in which students consider the scene they saw, reflecting on the characters and their personalities and thinking about what they might do differently if they were one of the characters in the situation. Students could also look at the situation from a generic point of view and say what others might do. Whichever approach they take, they will share their ideas with a partner or a group.

This step between the performance and the Replacement Performance is a great buffer. Simply jumping in and taking on the role of a character is high risk behavior for many students. This goes back to one of the common complaints of using role-plays in class: shy students may fear this type of participation in the class (performing in front of others). With this think-pair-share approach, shyer students can contribute, but they are not pressured to perform. Students could even do a read-through in their group with the new dialogue. This read-through could serve to boost students' confidence and be a step towards developing the reassurance they might need to ultimately perform the role-play.

While some students are shy about performing, others do not feel comfortable writing a full-scale dialogue based on a theme. Inventing each exchange of an extended conversation can be a daunting task. With Replacement Performance role-play, the students only need to write lines for, and define the message or opinion of, one character. And these lines are based on the existing conversation, so the task is not as demanding as writing a whole dialogue.

The group work here allows students to use their critical thinking skills. As an example, we can say when students are working in groups, they will compare their *knowledge* and *comprehension* of the situation depicted, *apply* what they know of similar situations to *analyze* and explain the different characters in the situation. Moving up Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills, students then *synthesize* by pooling their knowledge to rewrite dialogue and invent a new response for a character. In rewriting the dialogue, students should be encouraged to predict how these new lines might affect the other characters' dialogue. *Evaluation* can be made a part of the exercise, by having the class discuss the various Replacement Performances and which one seemed most plausible or believable and explain why. They can even be prompted to talk about how different lines affected the story line by answering such questions as: Was the message in the grammar or in the intonation? There are many ways the discussion could branch off.

Replacement Performance

After groups have worked together to rewrite a character's lines for a Replacement Performance, the role-play is repeated. In this

Replacement Performance, only one character is replaced. All of the other characters remain the same. The replacement character enters the scene where the original character did and delivers his or her new lines when appropriate. The other original characters remain and try to keep with the same dialogue and character until it is no longer possible due to the conversation shift. This is where it becomes more challenging for a language learner. Students will need to respond on-the-spot to changes in the dialogue without changing the personalities of their characters.

However, this is also where the language practice is at its most dynamic. The role-play is no longer a 100 percent pre-set dialogue that students merely memorize and deliver, but it is truly interactive, fluid, and dependent on what others say. It becomes a type of improvisation for the language learners. However, it is not a full improvisation. The learners know the original dialogue, know the lines they have changed, and in their group work, they should have predicted the reaction the other characters would have to their changes.

If the improvisation becomes too challenging for the replacement character, another member of the group could step in and continue the story for that same character. However, the teacher should note at what point and why the replacement character got stuck. Using this information, the teacher can lead a discussion on the purpose of the dialogue and what message would be appropriate, how to convey it, common expressions that could have been used, and so on.

Additional ideas

Replacement Performance role-play is rich with teaching ideas, points of departure, and extensions. A few ideas follow.

Video clips from movies, TV shows

Another option for creating a scene is to use one from a video as a point of departure. It could take time to collect appropriate scenes, but depending on the context and student interest, it might be even more effective to show a portion from a popular television series in which the characters are in a difficult decision, an impasse, or some type of predicament. If it is a show that students are quite familiar with, they might be more comfortable assuming the role of that character. For example, the sitcom *Friends* is very popular and shown in over 100 countries. It has many scenes that could be used for this Replacement Performance activity. If *Friends* is not available, a locally known or produced sitcom or television series could be used. Part of an appropriate scene could be shown a few times, and volunteers could take on certain roles. There can still be one "replacement" role where the character's actions and lines are unknown. Students can predict what the character could say or do and perform that with the others. After a number of performances, the video of the entire scene could be shown as a comparison and then serve as a topic of discussion.

Culture

Using TV shows or movies in conjunction with this activity not only provides more visuals and ideas for situations, but they also provide a point of departure for teaching cultural aspects that arise from this type of role-play. Let's take the example of *Friends* above. Although shown in so many countries, this sitcom shows a particular cultural way of communicating and includes culturally loaded scenes (American holidays, ceremonies, values, etc.). A role-play could be set up using a local context, and then it could be compared to a similar scene in *Friends*. Students should be reminded that a particular scene from a sitcom represents only one of many possible interactions in the culture where the sitcom is based, but the sitcom remains an engaging point of departure.

In Japan for example, learners of Japanese are often advised to watch *Sazae-san* to gain an understanding of cultural aspects of that country. Jungheim (2000) believes the show is rich source of pragmatics for understanding Japanese communication in verbal and nonverbal behavior. There are probably local shows in every country that could provide the core of such an activity.

Other aspects of culture might emerge from Replacement Performance role-play, depending upon the student population of the class. If there is a heterogeneous mix, the characteristic ways various cultural groups communicate might become evident. North Americans generally give a slight shake of the head when saying no; Turks will sometimes

tsk and tip their head back a bit to indicate a similar message. This simple message can be misunderstood cross culturally. For example, a friend of mine needed a restroom rather urgently in Turkey. She knew enough Turkish to ask if there was a restroom she could use. The response she received was the *tsk* and the flip of the head. She took that as a message to indicate the restroom was up the stairs and proceeded up. The Turks needed to clarify their response to her, which was embarrassing for both parties.

Simple verbal misunderstandings occur across cultures as well. For example, saying that something will be done "just now" has different meanings in different cultures. For North Americans, it generally means that something will be done without delay. For South Africans, saying "just now" means maybe in a bit; but that "bit" could be up to 30 minutes later. These time markers can cause irritation for both sides communicating, but the difference in meaning is not evident until it is too late.

The verbal and non-verbal cultural differences mentioned above could naturally surface in heterogeneous English language classes using Replacement Performance role-play. An instructor could also intentionally include a cultural or pragmatic point in the original performance dialogue. Either way, the resulting dialogue or scene can help raise students' awareness about communication that is culturally specific or different from their own.

Conclusion

Role-plays in the language learning classroom have been around for many years in many formats. Some formats have assisted learners in memorizing dialogue lines. Others have given students the opportunity to imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom. In this article, I tried to show that an approach called Replacement Performance role-play goes beyond these two by combining some aspects of the classic role-plays, but also expanding the training to include more focused work on critical thinking, pragmatic awareness, cultural differences, and personal response; all of these are skills necessary for successful communication regardless of the language being learned.

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Conclusion

Teachers and students have reacted positively to the new assessment procedures at the CLC, where testing has become a lever for instructional improvement. The EFL program now has a valid and reliable testing system to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses and identify staff development needs. Most importantly, the changes have not yielded a finished product because they are related to performance objectives and not to a specific textbook, which leaves room for an adaptation and further change if necessary.

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Appendix Sample Dialogue

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Scene: Two students walking toward class and talking about the upcoming exam.

Student A: Good Morning!

Student B: Morning, are you ready for the exam?

Student A: No, I didn't really have a chance to study, but I have a little help in case I need it. (flashes a cheat sheet)

Student B: You're going to *cheat*?

Student A: Only if I have to. I didn't have time to study last night.

(They walk into the classroom, and Student A takes a seat next to Student B.)

Teacher: Good morning, class. As you know, there is an exam today. Please remove your books from your desks and just have your pencils ready. You will have 30 minutes for the exam. When you are finished, you may leave.

Scene: Student A visibly needs to cheat and tries looking at Student B's paper and looking at the cheat sheet, avoiding being caught by the teacher.
Student A finishes first and accidentally drops the cheat sheet. It lands near Student A. Student A leaves. Later, the teacher sees the cheat sheet and believes it belongs to Student B. The teacher questions Student B about the paper.