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Role Playing as a Contrivance

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We all might be a bit skeptical about the claims some teachers make about the powerful potential of role playing as a fun way of building learners' confidence and increasing their motivation. Such strong claims, and the fact that so many texts provide dialogs designed for role playing, surely suggest that role playing has some value. If we accept that it does, it seems reasonable to list ways to incorporate role playing into speaking activities. And, if some of us have bad memories from our own experiences doing role playing activities, rather than project our negative feelings on others, it might be more profitable to see what aspects of role playing, if different, might have made our bad experiences more positive. Or, if our experiences were positive, we simply have to note what aspects of role playing made them positive.

Textbooks Versus Plays

One way we can discover some positive aspects of role playing is by comparing how it is dealt with in plays, where its role is central, to how it is dealt with in most textbooks, where its role is tangential. In plays, stage directions provide information for actors and actresses that is rarely given in textbooks (e.g., how characters are to say the lines, given a certain personality). For example, in textbooks, those who are going to role play a dialog are usually told simply that one person is to be a customer and another a clerk, or one person a doctor and the other a patient; in plays, on the other hand, it is not unusual to find stage directions to speakers about what kind of a customer, clerk, doctor, or patient they are to be. The stage directions in plays also tell a great deal about the setting in which the characters are to play their parts, including

descriptions of rooms, placement of furniture, and lighting. In addition, they contain precise directions about some of the actions that characters are to perform. Within brackets before the printed lines, it is not unusual to find comments such as "looking at his wedding ring," "moves from her bed to the sink," "in an angry voice," or "looking away." In short, many plays contain stage directions that describe the place where the lines are said, the mood of the place, and specific advice about what characters are to do as they say the lines, as well as advice about how the lines should be said.

In contrast, the criteria actors and actresses have for expressing their lines in plays are absent from the dialogs in most textbooks. Consequently, teachers and students do not have any criteria to determine whether the lines are being delivered in tune with what is needed. In the absence of criteria about how the lines are to be delivered, the only criterion that is left is accuracy. The central questions thus becomes, "Are the lines printed in the dialog and the lines that the student says identical?" One reason we stress the importance of getting the words right (i.e., "learning the lines by heart") is that we rarely have available suggestions for saying the lines *with* heart. (We sometimes get so concerned about getting the lines said "right," as well as heard, that we encourage those doing the role play to say the lines "loudly, so that those in the back can hear," even if the dialog being presented involves two people in a telephone conversation, where speaking loudly can be quite inappropriate.) The fact that so many learners stand stiffly and face each other during many role plays is no doubt related to the absence of criteria for the delivery of lines.

This absence of criteria may be one of

the reasons some might recall with some distaste saying lines from dialogs in front of a class. Doing a role play by saying words one is looking at in a book or that one has memorized are very common experiences in schools. But being told that saying lines from a dialog that one has memorized or is looking at as one is saying them is called role playing simply because the recitation is being done in front of the class does not necessarily mean that the task is different from simply reciting lines while standing or sitting at one's own desk. The mechanical, muted applause that is often proffered at the end of "role plays" in many classes suggests that everyone is going through motions rather than expressing and reacting to meanings that are in tune with criteria.

Textbook Dialogs: Adding Stage Directions

If we believe that criteria for performance above and beyond getting the words right are potentially positive aspects of role playing, stage directions can be added. It is not as difficult to add stage directions to dialogs in textbooks as it is to write stage directions for a play because, for one thing, there is no character development in the short dialogs in textbooks, nor are there plots. Consequently, whether we assign anger to a customer or to a waiter, calmness to a doctor or a patient, or vice versa, it does not matter in most cases. Any criteria can be assigned to any lines; the important thing is that the lines have to be delivered in tune with the established criteria.

In establishing criteria, we have to describe details of both the setting and the characters. Of course, the settings themselves are usually noted. What we have to add are details about the settings. For example, if the setting noted in a textbook is a bus, what details could we add? Asking each person in a class simply to write down one word that comes to his or her mind when we mention the word "bus" produces more than enough details. Here are some free associations some students made when asked what words came to their minds when the word "bus" was mentioned: "crowded," "empty," "hot, even

with the windows open," "air conditioned," "windy," "moving quickly along a street with little traffic," "stuck in traffic and moving slowly," "in a noisy area," "in a quiet area," "modern, with a smooth, quiet running engine," and "old, with a jerky, noisy running engine."

Once we have a range of details, all we have to do is write a few on the board that we agree to use as criteria for the role play. If we write on the board stage directions such as "crowded, hot, moving slowly, in a noisy area, with a noisy running engine," then the speakers will have to speak loudly and stand close to each other. They might act a bit nervous as well. They might also, from time to time, wipe their foreheads with a handkerchief. If we write on the board stage directions like "air conditioned, moving slowly, in a quiet area, with a quiet running engine," then the speakers can speak in a normal tone of voice, or even whisper. They can sit calmly rather than stand, and there will be no need to wipe their foreheads with a handkerchief.

Following Stage Directions

Since it is difficult to meet two sets of criteria at the same time, it is probably better to do role plays in stages. In stage one, the goal is to match the delivery of the lines to the setting. For example, if a bus is crowded, the learners have to stand close to each other as they say their lines; if it is noisy, then the lines have to be said loudly.

After those in our classes play with saying the lines differently so that they are in tune with different settings, we can move to stage two: delivering lines in tune with explicitly stated characteristics of the characters. If, for example, one of the bus passengers is nervous about getting off at the right stop, frequent looks out the windows are likely. If both passengers are angry about having waited for the bus, they might say their lines without smiling.

As part of either the first or the second stage, we need to provide the means for our students to have props to use in their role

playing. Props seem to provide a distraction from attention to words for their own sake, for both the audience and the players. Holding a pencil, meant to represent a screw driver, for example, has the effect of drawing attention to the meaning of the action and the words related to the action. The meaning of a line such as, "I can't loosen it [a screw]; it's too tight" becomes the focus of attention if we say the line as we pretend to loosen an imaginary screw with a pencil we are attributing the characteristics of a screwdriver to. Our imaginations might also be tapped more when we use props to represent various objects than when we use the real objects themselves.

Props can also have an effect on the strength and power of the delivery. Using a pencil to represent a microphone often both distracts the speaker from worrying about the loudness of the words that need to be said and, simultaneously, increases the decibel level. It seems to be the rule that when we speak into microphones or telephones during long distance calls, we tend to (ironically!) raise our voices.

In addition, when props are part of a role play, the characters have a built in excuse for a few seconds of getting accustomed to being in front of an audience. When actors and actresses enter the stage to start a scene, they often move around a bit, adjust a glass on a table, or fiddle with their gloves, as if they need to feel a part of the new scene before they speak. Props used in role plays can provide a way for students to meet this need, while giving them a few moments to get accustomed to a scene and enabling them to focus on producing their lines in a fashion that is in tune with criteria that have been jointly established by learners and teacher.

Preparation Activities

To enable learners to connect lines, settings, and emotions quickly, we should ensure recognition of the established criteria. One way of doing this is by saying lines in a particular way and asking the learners to indicate the emotion we used. For example,

we could precede asking learners to say lines as if they were in a "crowded, hot bus," or an "empty, air conditioned bus," by asking them to indicate which lines we deliver are angry and which are patient, or engaging. Learners can do this in a number of ways, for example, pointing to a sketch on the board of an angry face as opposed to a happy face.

Once learners can identify the emotions our lines are in tune with, and also say different lines that are in tune with the stage directions, they can practice delivering lines. Practicing in small groups allows more individuals to play with the lines at the same time. This can also provide groups with time for further clarification of the criteria before delivering the dialog in front of the class. Also, if only two or three are going to deliver lines to the whole class, small group work allows the rest of the class the chance to apply the criteria in their own production. To ensure that those in each group are attempting to deliver the lines in tune with the criteria, each group should have both an observer and a person representing each character in the role play. The role of the observer, which each in the group can assume in rotation, is to note gestures or facial expressions or write down groups of words that are delivered that are or are not in tune with the criteria.

Other Sources for Dialogs

Textbook dialogs are not the only materials appropriate for role playing. Nor is it critical that each dialog or exchange be long and contain a wide range of grammatical points, language functions, or word usage. The main purpose of role plays has never been to teach set pieces to be produced outside the class. Rather, lines in role plays provide samples of a wide range of functions and grammatical points which we can learn to recognize during role plays. The activity also provides opportunities to manipulate and play with language in class, with the hope that we will feel more ready to speak to other individuals outside class.

Because only one goal of role playing is to illustrate grammatical points, language

functions, or word usage, almost any individual line in any text can be used for role playing. Since all textbooks contain loads of directions, they are one natural source of lines. "Match the words with the definitions. Look carefully at the following exercises," and other directions printed before each activity, can be played with not only to deepen understanding and mastery of imperatives; they can also provide opportunities to discover how our delivery of directions is perceived by those in our classes.

To elicit criteria for stage directions for the directions in the textbooks we use and for the directions we regularly give, we can ask those in our class to write down words that come to their minds as we say a particular direction. Their words will reveal how they perceive our delivery. Here are a few descriptions from some learners: "matter of factly," "with enthusiasm," "for a beginning class," "neutral," "like a tape in the lab," and "as if speaking to babies."

We might discover that the directions we say in what we consider a helpful way, (e.g., stressing each word and speaking ever so slowly) are perceived as being condescending by some who hear them. Over time, we might alter the way we give directions as a result of learning that our perception of our delivery and the perception of those in our classes are sometimes radically different. We might change our roles as a result of stage directions those in our class think we have been following which we in fact do not want to be following.

Social Language

From directions we normally give in our classes to directions in our textbooks, we can move to even more rudimentary samples of language. Greetings, introductions, leave takings, expressions of gratitude, and all other formulas lend themselves to role playing. Those in our classes not only need to be able to express a greeting with energy and delight, but also with coolness and reserve. Some people who are greeted by complete strangers with great energy become suspicious, wonder-

ing what the stranger wants. Such information is a key part of language learning. For example, just as those in our classes have to realize that their own greetings can have different meanings depending on the way they say them, they also have to be able to recognize when greetings are made to them sarcastically, or as an insult, as well as in a friendly, positive way. If they are not reminded that even "thank you" can express negative emotions, they are not learning a vital part of the target language. Without being given experience in both recognizing and producing such formulas, with both positive and negative emotions, they are likely to misinterpret many interactions.

Eavesdropping

Since a key part of role playing is the need to recognize a range of meanings that can be expressed by the same words, in the same sequence, with identical grammatical patterns, it makes sense to ask those in our classes to eavesdrop on exchanges they hear outside class and write down what they hear. While audio taping such exchanges provides better data and more chances for producing accurate written versions, many people are offended by being taped without being told. Of course, taped exchanges from videos and movies can be listened to repeatedly in order to accurately transcribe the exchanges. Information about the settings as well as the people speaking should be added so some criteria will be available for future role playing involving the recorded exchanges.

The short exchanges below were overheard and tape recorded at a counter in a department store where an employee was trying to sign customers up for charge accounts. The role of both speakers is quite constant, and thus easier to catch than in exchanges where the roles change.

1. Clerk: Excuse me, would you like to open a charge account?
2. Customer: No thanks. I already have one.
3. Clerk: Good evening, would you like to open a charge account here?
4. Customer: No, sorry.

5. Clerk: Good evening, would you like to open a charge account?
6. Customer: (ignores question and walks by)
7. Clerk: Good evening, would you like to open a charge account?
8. Customer: (pauses at counter)
9. Clerk: It won't take too much of your time.
10. Customer: O.K.
11. Clerk: Are you employed?
12. Customer: Yeah.
13. Clerk: How long have you been at your present job?
14. Customer: Almost two years.
15. Clerk: Good. If you step over here, we can fill out the form.

The repetition of the same question poses not a language challenge but a role playing challenge. How can a person say the same line repeatedly so that it sounds new and inviting each time, rather than mechanical and stale? Of course, after many, many repetitions, it is hard to imagine that a learner would not master the line, and will perhaps even remember it longer than most lines. But many would relish repeating the line over and over to see if they could vary their delivery to make it engaging each time, more than if they simply had to repeat it as a means to try to memorize the line.

Collecting exchanges outside the classroom, either from live exchanges or films or videos, reminds us all of how secondary the words we say are to the relationships that they establish or maintain and the feelings that they express. Consider the many meanings possible in the following exchanges in an elevator.

1. Man: Hi.
2. Woman: (looks at the arrow going up)
3. Hi.
4. Man: I'm afraid you're going to take a little ride.
5. Woman: (after several seconds)
6. That's all right; the company's pleasant.
7. Man: And, how are you?
8. Woman: Just fine, thanks.
9. Man: (arriving at his floor)
10. Well, that wasn't too bad. Take care now.
11. Woman: Goodnight.

The lines exchanged by the man and woman provide data for a wide range of stage directions. Adding a direction to "smile" here, "frown" there, or to say a line with "suspense" rather than "relaxation," can provide very distinct roles.

Incidentally, the numbers next to each line of the exchanges above are not trivial additions. Before stage directions are added, it is useful to have those in our classes number all the lines. Directions can then be related to specific lines more easily: for example, "Add 'takes off his hat' to line 1." We can also easily ask someone to say a particular line, since all we have to say is, "Please say line 10, as if you are exhausted."

Dialogs that we collect from live exchanges or films or videos lend themselves to rewriting as much as any textbook dialogs. In both cases, we are free to attribute emotions to the characters (which changes the meanings of the words), alter their movements, as well as provide opportunities to change the words themselves. Adding "(takes out a gun)" to line 3 would force a number of subsequent word changes, and quite different renditions of the subsequent lines. Using actual dialogs, thus, can allow for just as much use of the imagination as dialogs written to illustrate particular points in textbooks.

The novelty of even the most dramatic exchanges from movies or live conversations can wear thin after a while. As those in our classes tire of words that others have said or written, they can be invited to compose their own dialogs, based either on pictures in the textbooks they have, pictures they bring to class, sketches they draw to develop an exchange, or on their own imaginations.

Reflections

Because of the need for more contrivance, some will consider the characterization of roles (e.g., personality traits, interests, and motivations) and settings (e.g., temperature, noise level, number of participants, and postures of participants) quite unnatural. There is no question that characterizations of roles and settings is unnatural. Nor is there any

question, however, that role playing itself is unnatural, even when we simply say one person is to be a waiter and one a customer in a cafe. Nor, if we continue the argument, is there any question that having x number of people in a room to learn a language is unnatural. Schools and classes are contrivances! But so are travel agencies, banks, post offices, car showrooms, assembly lines, computing offices, and just about every other setting in which we participate.

Just as we provide details of settings and people, so those in our classes have criteria beyond getting the words right. Therefore, we need criteria to see whether the alternatives we try produce any differences in our students. Are those in our classes saying lines with a greater range of movement and voice modulation as we characterize roles and settings? Is the polite, restrained applause that often

follows the usual formal, stilted "role plays" replaced by some laughter, expressions of astonishment, jeering, a few bravos and bravas, and some stomping of feet? Are the scripts those in our classes produce produced with more vigor and interest, and are they more varied, less mechanical, and more engaging when written by learners who assume a range of personality traits and roles that match real world settings in which people have to write certain things for very specific audiences and with precise purposes? Along the way, is there a bit of confusion? Mystery? Annoyance? Wonderment? Wonderful! A range of emotional reactions suggests a range of involvement, which is normal in the real world outside of the classroom. Contrivances in the classroom can make people natural, just as people are natural in a range of contrived situations outside the classroom.

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