DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF ESP LEARNERS WITH THE ROLE-PLAYING ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on giving basic information and investigating the advantage of role-playing activities on the communicative skill of pre-intermediate ESP learners. For this case, the outstanding scientists and researchers examined the students' speaking ability in two groups: the experimental group and the control group. Twenty-four male and female ESP learners at pre-intermediate level were selected after taking a pre-test. Then, they were divided into two groups in a random manner. In the experimental group, role-playing tasks were utilized for teaching conversation, but the control group was shown to the conventional method of teaching speaking. After some basic meetings and discussions of treatment, a post-test was conducted in order to check the students' speaking capability. According to the factual data, two independent and paired sample t-tests were used to analyze the data, collected using three testing instruments: Longman Placement Test (2004); the semi-structured interviews; and SPSS software version 20. Based on the inferential statistics, the participants in the experimental group illustrated an importantly better performance in the post-test. It was finished that the treatment provided for the experimental group had a positive effect on the learners' speaking ability. Additionally, the participants' attitudes to role-playing tasks and their roles in language learning were positive. It is expected that ESP teachers and text book writers, syllabus designers, and material producers will get advantage from the findings of this article.

KEYWORDS: *Communicative Competence, Communicative Activities, Role-Playing Activities, ESP Learners, Components Of Communicative Competence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term communicative competence refers to both the tacit knowledge of a language and the ability to use it effectively. It's also called communication competence, and it's the key to social acceptance.The concept of communicative competence (a term coined by linguist Dell Hymes in 1972) grew out of resistance to the concept of linguistic competence introduced by Noam Chomsky. Most scholars now consider linguistic competence to be a part of communicative competence. According to Canale and Swain's theory, there is a main model of Communicative Competence that can be used in oral and written form of communication. In "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing" (Applied Linguistics,

1980), Michael Canale and Merrill Swain identified these four components of communicative competence **[1]:**

1) Grammatical competence includes knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation and sentence formation.

2) Sociolinguistic competence includes knowledge of sociocultural rules of use. It is concerned with the learners' ability to handle for example settings, topics and communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts. In addition, it deals with the use of appropriate grammatical forms for different communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts.

3) Discourse competence is connected with the learners' mastery of comprehending and producing texts in the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It deals with cohesion and coherence in different types of texts.

4) Strategic competence related to compensatory strategies in case of grammatical or sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties, such as the use of reference sources, grammatical and lexical paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status or in finding the right cohesion devices. It is also connected with such performance factors as coping with the nuisance of background noise or using gap fillers.

Students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom and have also limited exposure to English speakers in the international community. Richards and Renandya (2002) pointed out that a large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to improve quality in speaking. Speaking is used in most daily interactions and transactions and that is why many the researchers, language experts, curriculum designers, teachers, mentors and language trainers claim that speaking is the main sense feature of the second language learning and teaching. People who know a language are related to as speakers of the language, as if speaking contained all other kinds of knowing and many if not most foreign language learners have not interest primarily in learning to speak. From this time, speaking is considered as one of the essential elements of communication in EFL and ESP teaching. It provides opportunities for learners to present their meaning in spoken way.

Communication is one of the four macro skills necessary for useful talking in any language, particularly when speakers are not using their mother tongue. Most of the time, English learners find it difficult to enhance their speaking ability and establish their relations with others. Since English is a global language utilized, as a means of communication, speaking skill should be improved along with other skills so that these integrated skills increase communication achievement of the learners in an international community. For many people, mastering speaking abilities is the main aim of acquiring a foreign or second language and the other skills are overshadowed by its importance (McCarthy, 1998 **[1]**). Thus, teachers are demanded to emphasize on the verbal form of FL and try to help students engage in speaking. In other words, when students are engaged in dialogues, their motivation and self-confidence will develop and help them with their speaking abilities. To teach speaking abilities, teachers used to conduct and give some patterns to focus on some particular elements of language form. They tried to continue practicing by repetitions. As we know, practice makes perfect. On this case, the teacher used and

provided some chances for the students to listen and to repeat peculiar strings of language that may pose some linguistic difficulty in oral form (Brown, 2007) **[2].**

As a great achievement in teaching a foreign language, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has proved itself very effective in bringing about real situations of language use in language learning setting. Still, as Kumaravadivelu (2006) **[3]** comments, the more the novelty of communicative language teaching is wearing thin, the more "Task-Based Language Teaching" (TBLT) is gaining significance. In other words, in the post-modern era, the word "communicative" is gradually being replaced by the word "task". Hence, task-based instruction is shedding a new insight on teaching English as a foreign language. As the title of this research illustrates, its underlying aim is to research the efficiency of role-playing on the speaking ability of pre-intermediate ESP learners.

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the beginnings of what we now recognize as a "communicative approach" as we better comprehend the functions that must be incorporated into a classroom (Brown, 2007) **[2].** Meaning was significant in communicative language teaching (CLT) while grammar was ignored completely. Grammar would be acquired unconsciously. During the last decades, technology has developed so fast and learners are required to cope with them. CLT was more appropriate because it demanded interacting with speakers of other languages especially from the developed countries in order to accept merits of technology and cultural interactions. Scientists believed with great force that students would learn language fast if they interacted with other language learners in various contexts to negotiate meaning (Richards, 2006) Richards popularized group work, role-play, and project work as interesting and commonly used activities of CLT. Zainudin (2011) and his colleagues presented that these activities created an information gap. Richards supposed that communication must take place to shorten the gap and do the task. The focus of these activities was to negotiate meaning. It happened in a real situation. So, these activities improve the learners' opportunities to attract in learning and acquiring the language.

The tenets of communicative language teaching pay attention to students' capacity to utilize language in real-life situations, which were conducted in foreign and second language classroom. In task-based instruction, the priority is not the *forms* of language, but rather the functional *purposes* for which language must be used. While content-based instruction focuses on subject-matter content, task-based instruction focuses on a whole set of real world tasks themselves (Brown, 2007) **[2].** This model offers the opportunity to "natural" learning inside the classroom and emphasizes meaning over form, but can also cater for learning form. Additionally, when learners are preparing their task, they are expected to consider language form in general rather than focusing on a single form. It is completely giving motivation and compatible with learner-centered educational philosophy. Furthermore, through various situations students have many opportunities to check their speaking skills and integrate the other skills.

As we come to the origin of role play, it is absolutely interesting and effective way of improving communicative competence. The history of role-play goes back to ancient times of Greeks when the play was used as a medium for requirement. Perhaps, the first role-play session was run when a master teaching a pupil, said to him: 'Act as if I am a customer and you are serving me'. The pupil played his role. The master played his role as a would-be-customer. When they made discussion their roles afterwards, play was utilized as method of instruction (Dorathy, 2011 **[4]**).

The educational usage of role-play in recent years has become more widely used. As Newmark points out, (Lakhdar Barker, 2006 **[5]**), imaginary play has always been a powerful educational device both for children and adults. By creating a dramatic situation (role-playing) in a classroom by relabeling objects and people in the room the teacher can enlarge the classroom indefinitely and support imaginary natural contexts for the language being used.

Harmer (2001) **[6]** advocates the use of role-play for three reasons:

a) It is interesting and inspiring;

b) Quieter students get the opportunity to show themselves in a more open way;

c) The word of the classroom is broadened to include the outside word.

Nguyen (2017) in his study compared the effect of role plays on young learners with adults with two different numbers of learners. Results illustrated that there is an essential difference in the scores gained from the adult group in the post test and found that the role-plays in pairs and small groups helped the weak students and role-plays should be used in the working adult students. That is, using role plays was demonstrated to exert a positive effect on the speaking ability enhancement of the learners compared to busy and young ones. It was observed that those learners who got more attention and scaffolds illustrated greater progress in their speaking.

According to Tompkins (1998), role-playing or simulation is a valuable technique for foreign language learning. It gives the learners opportunities to act out different roles chosen to show actual role that would be in the field of situation. Role-playing is a good technique to check interaction in foreign language classroom, and in teacher and management trainings. It shows a shift of attention and focus to more real, certain conversation and communication. **[7]**

Thus, incorporating role-playing in the classroom adds diversity to the activity of the classroom. It is an opportunity for language production along with fun. Real life situation can be created and students can have advantage from practice; especially if it is created for a specific purpose. The teaching of English for specific purposes in its early days was largely motivated by the need to communicate across language in areas such as commerce and technology. A key feature of an ESP course is that the goals and content of the course are oriented to the specific needs of learners. ESP courses then focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English, mainly, ESP students are adult learners. They are also often a homogenous group in terms of learning goals, although not always in terms of language effectiveness. So, due to the significance of communication in the process of learning a foreign language and difficulties of ESP learners in learning this vital skill, the aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of role-playing as a technique on developing speaking ability of pre-intermediate ESP learners.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper took the merit of a quantitative, quasi-experimental research design. The participants, who were the staff of a hotel in Chabahar, were 24 learners at the pre-intermediate level selected by taking a pre-test. Their age range was above twenty-five. They were male and female learners but the gender was not under the focus of this research. These participants were in two groups: twelve participants in the control group and the twelve others were in the treatment or experimental group. These two groups were not selected randomly, but they were defined to

treatment and experimental groups randomly. At first, the learners participated in a placement test conducted by the language center affiliated to the English department of Chabahar Maritime University to measure how much they know English.

This study was held at a hotel in Chabahar. A Longman Placement Test was administered prior to the study to ensure that learners were at the same level of proficiency. Actually, to present the efficiency level of the participants, four macro-skills of language learning were tested. Then, to check and assess the level of learners' speaking ability, a speaking examination as a pre-test was managed in both control and experimental groups. In the interview, the learners were asked some questions about their personal backgrounds appropriate for pre-intermediate learners, such as their age, academic major, hometown and their mother tongue. After the administration of the pre-test examination which supplied with information for the test of participants' homogeneity, the treatments started in research groups for eighteen sessions. It took six weeks, and was held three times a week continuing for two hours of teaching. In the experimental group, role-playing was conducted in performing conversation through in-group activities. To follow a general lesson planning, the researcher tried to observe three steps in the experimental group.

Step 1. Preview (Pre-Task Phase)

To help the learners prepare for what they were going to act out in the speaking, the researcher asked different questions about the topic to check and make active their background knowledge. Then, some appropriate vocabularies with preview activities were practiced.

Step 2. Listening and Speaking (Task Phase)

After a preview activity, the researcher played the listening material for a general understanding to give the opportunity to the learners to get the basic interpretation and act out the material later. At this stage, learners were expected to listen to the pronunciation of the new words and learn the structure of the phases or sentences. The following week, learners were given a text in the form of dialogues. They were asked to read them together, to get the gist, and to express their ideas about the content of the role they were going to perform. Finally, learners were asked to act out and play the role of each individual according to the tape.

Step 3. Acting out or role-playing

In the final stage, dialogues were given to the learners to practice each situation with one another. The situations were examples of real-world conversations related to the hotel staff, required to meet the needs of following personnel: receptionists, porter, waiters/waitress, room-attendants, technicians, and kitchen staff. To conduct role-playing, the teacher's role was very important. The teacher helped the learners whenever it was needed. Each role-play was performed at least twice with learners changing their roles. In group situations the competent learners acted out the role-play to the whole class. **[8]**

The teacher used to take one of the roles if needed. The teacher avoided making corrections until role-playing was finished. The teacher was also a facilitator. As learners kept on practicing the role-play, they sometimes found that they had problems with understanding new words and phrases. In the practice stage, the teacher had the chance to 'feed-in' the appropriate information. This required the teacher to act as a sort of facilitator or a spectator monitoring the class and offering assistance when it was necessary at the end. The teacher sometimes engaged in the

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classroom activity as a participant; that is, when the situation demanded, the teacher got attracted and took part in the role-playing. **[9]**

But, in the control group, the conventional method of teaching speaking was used. That is, the teacher asked questions to warm up the learners and practiced suitable vocabulary items with preview activities. In the control group, the teacher utilized reading tasks and conversation between two learners without giving them the chance to act out role-playing. Finally, both groups' speaking ability was measured after the treatment and quantitative data was gathered through post-test. Post-test was an interview recorded. The interviews were rated by two PhD candidates in TEFL. So, semi-structured interview was used to check and evaluate how the participants of the experimental group felt about using role-playing tasks and its impact on enhancing their speaking skill. **[10]**

Data Analysis.

The quantitative analyses of the collected data were conducted with the aid of SPSS (version 22) software. For the aim of replying questions given by this research, at first descriptive statistics and an independent sample t-test were used to introduce the kind of data, data distribution, and data comparison to observe the groups' homogeneity and provide information to compare with the post-test data. An independent sample t-test was used to compare post-tests to participants on role-plays. Also, two paired sample t-test were used to evaluate whether the two groups had acquired any knowledge of speaking due to the treatment they accepted. A paired sample t-tests was used to compare the mean scores for two various groups (control and experimental). A test of Cronbach's Alpha formula and Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient were regulated to depict the internal consistency of the evaluation. Also, the data achieved from the interview were analyzed using descriptive analysis method. **[11]**

III. RESULTS

The researchers managed an item interview with twelve participants of the experimental group. The questions on the interview examined attitudes and world looking of the participants of the experimental group towards using role-playing tasks and their effects on their speaking ability. The most of the ESP learners believed that these tasks had an important impact on their speaking capability. Twelve participants (100%) in the experimental group answered that it was an enjoyable experience for them. A great number of the students found role-playing tasks were so informative and interesting. Shima said that "they were very interesting and attractive." All the participants in the experimental group stated that they intended to continue using these tasks, so that they helped them to enhance their speaking ability. All of the ESP learners mentioned that they like role playing tasks because they helped them to be so innovative and creative as well. Ali declared that: 'I like them, sir. I think they are so suitable for improving speaking skill.'' One of the questions was about the students' motivation to speak English by using role-playing tasks. The majority of the ESP learners agreed that role playing motivated them to speak English language. According to the interview, most of the students will use these tasks to improve their speaking skill. For example, Sine stated: ''I didn't try to improve my speaking ability up to now, but when I got familiar with these tasks, I plan to reinforce it.'' They were also interested to gather some new experience through using these tasks in the class. Actually, the interest and enthusiasm among the ESP learners regarding role plays were vividly present through the amount of positive response. Then we can finish that many pre-intermediate ESP learners had a

positive attitude towards utilizing role-playing tasks and their effects on their speaking ability. **[12]**

IV. DISCUSSION

As it was mentioned above, today's study made an effort to answer the research questions regarding the impact of role-playing task on improving ESP learners' speaking ability and the approaches, treatments of ESP learners towards using role play and its effect on their speaking skill. Actually, it was conveyed that there was main difference between the performance of the role play group and control group on the post-test in comparison to their pretest results achieved; yet the role play group had a better performance in comparison to the control group which confirmed the essential reasons, impacts of role playing on the speaking ability of pre-intermediate ESP learners. Factually, the results illustrated role-playing tasks were useful and developed the speaking ability of pre-intermediate learners because they helped the ESP learners focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself. It can be said that role-play tasks can transform the language teaching and learning process from non-inventive to an inventive and attractive form and provide ESP learners an opportunity to practice speaking skills in multiple social contexts and roles. **[13]**

Also, role-playing technique can expand ESP learners' creativity in the process of language learning. Providing role-play tasks in classrooms contributes to the collaborative and cooperative learning and raises the level of exposure to peer scaffolding which benefits all learners. Also, with regard to the findings of the study obtained from the post- treatment interview, the participants of the experimental group had a positive attitude concerning the advantage of role-playing tasks on their speaking ability. The present study's results accord with Nguyen's study (2017), which compared the impact of role-playing tasks on young and adult learners with two different numbers of learners. The Results showed that role-playing tasks had significant effect on improving speaking ability of EFL learners. Therefore, by applying role-playing tasks in the process of language teaching, we can support good chances for introvert learners to present their ideas and combine the world outside with the classroom (Harmer, 2001) **[6].**

Students who practiced role-playing had to use the power of their imagination, have rehearsals and act out in class in front of their peers and this process probably improved their expressive ability. They were thus more conscious of the grammatical competence when demonstrated their roles and more prepared for the actual conversations in real events. Interestingly, the participants in the present study enjoyed various models and the researcher observed less and less errors in their speaking with working out functional and situational conversations one after the other in the proceeding sessions, which highly pinpoints the conscious-raising and self-monitoring development power of learners who practice role plays. Also, the current study showed that when Learners are involved in role-playing activities, they can improve fluency in language and oral communication skills, as well as the use of the body in face-to-face communication. From the results of the study, it is concluded that incorporating role-play into classroom adds variety, a change of peace and opportunities for considerable language production.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicated that role-playing tasks had a significant impact on developing speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners and they had a positive attitude

regarding the usefulness of role-playing tasks for enhancing speaking ability. Role playing tasks were effective in teaching speaking and they can be one of alternative techniques in teaching speaking. In addition, it provided learners the chance not only to evaluate their own learning progress and proficiency, but also their peers' performance.

The main limitation of the study was the size of the class with limited number of students. Since the participants were staff of a hotel and busy most of the time, the researcher sometimes found it difficult to get together for further practice. Besides, the participants felt reluctant to become involved for fear of being humiliated before their colleagues. Yet, this technique has many positive impacts on the speaking ability of ESP learners so that it assists them tube exposed to a variety of experiences into the educational setting and enable them to interact with others. The researchers indicated that the foreign language teachers and instructors need to create a learning environment to compensate the authentic atmosphere in the process of language learning using pair-group work which helps in carrying out the learning process to be a successful work in promoting and adopting new techniques that will help to expand the speaking skills. Also, language teachers can get benefit from the results of this study so as to manipulate the methodology throughout their classes and keep their students motivated and encouraged. Furthermore, this study will assist university ESP students to develop their speaking ability along with technical English. Based on this study, further research can be done into the application of the technique on pre-intermediate university students having courses on General English. English language institutes offering English courses on different improvement levels can also carry it out. The study can be approached worldwide in several countries not just in teaching English but in teaching any other foreign Language.

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