

The Impact of 'Role Play' on Fostering EFL Learners' Speaking Ability: A Task-Based Approach

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Marking as one dramatic turnover in language teaching, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has proved itself beneficial and effective in bringing about real situations of language use to take place and in satisfying communicative needs of learners while the former methods were unable to meet actual demands of learners to communicate in the target settings. Accordingly, it has been duly embraced by practitioners and material developers simply because it specially pays serious and real attention to oral abilities. Relying on the theoretical background of this paradigm, the current study focused on role-play as a praised technique in task based language teaching (TBLT) to investigate and display its effect on boosting EFL learners' speaking skill. Following the termination of the study, the findings indicated for a positive effect of TBLT-based role-play technique on the candidates' speaking skill.

Key Words: task-based language teaching, speaking skill, role-play, CLT

1 Introduction

To many people, mastering speaking abilities is the ultimate goal of acquiring a foreign or second language and the other skills are overshadowed by its significance (McCarthy, 1998; Nunan, 2001a). To Bygate (1987), it is by this skill that learners are judged. It is the vehicle of social solidarity, social ranking, and business. It is also the medium through which much language is learnt. As a result, speaking is considered as one of the central elements of communication in EFL teaching. "It is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction" (Shumin, 1997). Spoken language is different from written language in many ways. It possesses features which make it more difficult and demanding compared with written language. While speaking, the speaker has no time looking over what s/he has expressed. In addition, the speaker is characteristically under pressure whereas it is not the case with the writer

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(Brown and Yule, 1983). Importantly, the feelings and feedback sent to the speaker may negatively affect him/her. Ur (1996) points out that among the four language skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language; as if speaking includes all required knowledge for a language. However, for multiple reasons it was neglected in traditional approaches such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) at the expense of mastering target language structure, its vocabulary, and studying literature (see for example, Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Chastain, 1988).

Later on, successive alternatives such as Direct Method (DM), Audio-lingual Method (ALM), and Situational Approach, paid more serious attention to oral abilities. Still second and especially foreign language learners were not able to use the language effectively in order to satisfy their needs. What has largely been overlooked is that practically conversation entails knowing how to use language to interact (Dörnyei and Thurrel, 1994). To support this, Nunan (2001a), for instance, argues for the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches in that students were able to parrot responses in predictable situation of use, but had difficulty communicating effectively in the relatively unpredictable world beyond the classroom. Therefore, the aforementioned approaches to language teaching faced severe criticism and a need for a new paradigm was felt, a paradigm which creates an authentic or real situation so that they would be able to act in the same way out of the class. Accordingly, Hadley (2003) proposed that there has to be a shift from grammatical competence to communicative competence.

Having the above discussions at hand, a new shift seemed to be required to satisfy such requirements. To respond to such demands, i.e. providing optimal circumstances for learners to improve their speaking ability in accordance with what 'communicating effectively' or 'meaningful communication' (Luchini, 2004) requires, task-based approach has been widely adopted since approximately twenty years ago (see for example, Long and Crooks, 1992; Skehan, 1996, 1998 ; Ellis, 2000, 2003; Carter and Nunan, 2001; Nunan, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). Needless to say that traditional approaches still have their own advocates.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), as a rather newly favored perspective toward language pedagogy, has been receiving significance and attraction since its emergence, at 1980s. It has, of course, undertaken gradual improvement over years. Task-based instruction (TBI) attempts to involve learners in actual use of language and through its instruction, effective communication in the target language is to be realized. It stands as an offspring of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) introduced to language methodology. Richards (1999) points out that task-based approach involves the use of tasks which engage learners in meaningful interaction and negotiation. One outstanding feature which differentiates TBLT from previous approaches is its reliance on research derived from second language acquisition. (See for example, Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1994; Long, 1981, 1983; Skehan, 1996, 1998).

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Taking into considerations the above-cited discussions, researchers and experts in the field believed that a syllabus with TBLT orientation is able to tap inherent potentials of learners in order that they would develop and activate their background knowledge while they approach real use of language. (See for example, Prabhu, 1987, Nunan, 2001a, Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

It is possible to find different sorts of activities in TBLT; however, it looks an ordeal to put them together in a single investigation. Therefore, role-play as one of those activities is selected to be practiced and examined in this study. The reasons to adopt role-play here are threefold. First, it is challenging; in role plays learners display instantaneously sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge in interaction (Tateyama, 1998). Second, as advocated by Harmer (1989), role-play is fun and motivating. It provides the chance for quieter students to express themselves in a more forthright way and the world of the classroom is broadened to include the outside world, thus offering a much wider range of language opportunities. Finally, it is a piece of activity which the researchers have practiced in conversation classes for years. The present study is, thus, intended to examine its effects on learners' oral abilities.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Communicative language teaching (CLT)

From the 1970s on, the realm of second and foreign language teaching experienced a considerable shift of paradigm. Mori (2002) believed that two leading theories namely communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and psycholinguistic theory of natural second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982) have greatly influenced language instruction. They have actually spread the idea of providing learners with 'authentic' or 'real life' opportunities while previously prevalent approaches put emphasis on language forms. Nunan (1989) distinguishes between 'learning that' and 'knowing how'. In other words, he stresses the need to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively when communicating.

Due to the insufficiency of the trends mentioned so far regarding language instruction as to enable learners to exploit their knowledge competently and communicatively, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) started becoming on fashion (see e.g., Ellis, 2000; Richards and Renandya, 2002; Widdowson, 1990). The reference is so frequent that Nunan (2001a) believes that the most pervasive changes to teaching practice on the last twenty years are those that can be described as communicative language teaching. Fulcher (2000) puts forth three aspects of CLT as: performance, authenticity, and real-life outcomes. Here, language is seen as a dynamic resource for the creation of meaning in terms of learning. Moreover, studies on CLT generally recommend language to be taught in favor of communication rather than focusing solely on language elements. However,

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CLT remained at the level of approach and failed to fulfill its fundamentals in practice. This might have been one reason for the rise of task-based language teaching (TBLT). More on this paradigm appears in the subsequent sections.

2.2 Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

As one of the offshoots of CLT, TBLT emerged to realize optimal conditions of learning a second or foreign language as well as to approach a more tangible and real situation for learners. It, as Ellis (2003) observes, constitutes a strong version of CLT. That is, tasks provide the basis for an entire language curriculum. TBLT develops communicative language teaching by providing a much greater range of classroom activities, and by providing much greater overall guidance for the teacher (Cook, 2001). In reaction to behaviorism, task-based syllabus appeared out of the stance that determining what learners would learn linguistically was next to impossible. Thus, Prabhu (1987) argued that it was necessary to abandon the pre-selection of linguistic items in any form and instead specify the content of teaching in terms of holistic units of communication, i.e. the task. Meanwhile, Long (1985) and Long and Crookes (1992) considered TBLT similar to Prabhu, but added the importance of attending to form at the same time. The basic rationale for TBLT derives from SLA research, particularly from descriptive and experimental studies comparing tutored and naturalistic learning. As an instance, in an experimental study on the application of a task-based course, Macdonough and Chaikitmonkolo (2007) indicated that the course had encouraged learners to become more independent and addressed their real world academic needs. Results suggest that formal instruction (a) has no effect on developmental sequences, (b) has a positive effect on the use of some learning strategies, (c) clearly improves rate of learning, and (d) probably improves the ultimate level of attainment (Doughty, 1991; Long, 1998). Furthermore, Lynch and Maclean (2000) resort to two sources of justification for TBLT. The first source of this justification is what they term 'the ecological one': the belief that the best way to promote effective learning is by setting up classroom tasks that reflect as far as possible the real-world tasks which the learners perform, or will perform. Second, those arguing for TBLT, drawing on SLA research, have tended to focus on issues such as learnability, the order of acquisition of particular L2 structures, the implications of the input, and the interaction of output hypotheses.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that TBLT is motivated primarily by a theory of learning. However, they outline several assumptions about the nature of language underlying current approaches to TBLT. 1. Language is primarily a means of making meaning. 2. Multiple models of language inform TBLT. Advocates of TBLT draw on structural, functional, and interactional models of language. 3. Lexical units are central in language use and language learning. 4. 'Conversation' is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition.

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Regarding the nature of learning, TBLT has premises in common with CLT. Nevertheless, Richards and Rodgers (2001) present some other principles with central roles in TBLT theory:

1. Tasks provide both the input and output processing necessary for language acquisition.
2. Tasks activity and achievement are motivational. They are also said to improve learner motivation and therefore promote learning
3. Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes.

As far as the definition of the 'task' is concerned, far too many definitions are available from various sources. As an instance, to Nunan (1989), a communicative task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in a comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language which their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Willis (2006) defines task as a goal-oriented activity with a clear purpose. Through the definitions presented for task in the literature, a collection of key elements can be extracted among which one can refer to priorities of meaning, process of thought, real world communication, and authenticity.

A task carries several constituents. Nunan (1989), as an instance, outlines a set of components regarding task comprising input, activities, goal, roles, and settings. He further shed more light on each component. Input data might be verbal (for example, a dialogue or reading passage) or nonverbal (for example, a picture sequence). Next is activity which sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input. The task will also have (implicitly or explicitly) a goal and roles for teachers and learners. Finally, setting refers to the classroom or any other place for learning.

The design of a task-based lesson goes through certain phases. The major stages involve 'pre-task', 'during task', and 'post-task' (see e.g., Nunan, 1989; Beglar and Hunt, 1999; Ellis, 2003; Willis, 2006). Pre-task stage is for the purpose of having different activities before the start of the task. Pre-task activities are essential for providing adequate support to the learners in their attempts to deal with a series of complex, challenging tasks. In some cases, new vocabulary, grammar, or knowledge of language functions are presented in the pre-activities. In fact, learners are supposed to have preparation for the task. Skehan (1996) points to two issues for teachers to choose at the pre-task; either emphasis on the general cognitive demands of task, or emphasis on linguistic features. The second step, i.e. during task, turns around the task itself. Learners perform the task. The third stage, i.e. post-task, creates an opportunity for, as Ellis (2003) notes, following up on the task performance.

As noted earlier in this chapter, TBLT comprises a various set of activities and role-play is one of the most recommended. As a result, this very activity has been picked up for the present research to determine its probable effect on boosting EFL learners' speaking ability. There exist definitely reasonable justifications for this choice which will be discussed in the next section.

2.3 Role-play

As mentioned previously, role refers to the part learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationship between the participants (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Role-play is a piece of activity exploited by different approaches to language teaching. It is a useful tool since through this activity, as Tateyama (1998) points out, more cognitive demands on learners' comprehension and production system are made and learners' ability to instantaneously incorporate sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge in interaction are examined. This technique is virtually one of the ways we can give our learners the opportunity to practice improving a range of real-life spoken language in the classroom (Chen-jun, 2006).

It deserves notice that there is a considerable body of literature in applying role-play. For example, Platt and Brooks (1994) studied the interpretation of role-play by two different groups. In their study, one group simply carried out the instructions in a mechanical fashion. Another group reconstructed the task in accordance with their own goals. They managed to show that the kind of talk produced by two groups differed greatly, with far more metatalk evident in the second. Also, in a study on the effect of role-play technique on the acquisition of English language structures, Najizade (1996) came to conclusion that role-play as an activity for bringing real language situations into classroom was considerably effective in improving subjects' acquiring the foreign language structures. In another study on the effect of task-based activities on the acquisition of structures, Najafi (1996) pointed out that learners' language structure improved through utilizing TBLT activities much more than structural techniques. Accentuating the merits of TBLT, Jalilifar (2005) persuades English teachers to make use of this perspective of language teaching in high schools so as to develop learners' communicative competence. On the same issue, Rashidi (2005) states that tasks are effective tools for applying the principles of CLT which represents the starting-point of a new movement in language teaching. And finally, Alavi (2005) prioritizes TBLT for learners at the level of high school since it goes through negotiation of meaning present in every communication as the key factor rather than forms.

Teachers and practitioners are strongly recommended to take into account some important considerations while intending to practice role-play. For instance, Baker (1989) believes that since in all role plays the candidate is required to play a part, s/he needs to be given clear instruction and sufficient time to understand them.

Looking back at the literature, one would notice the issue that voluminous research studies have been implemented on the use of TBLT and the effect of role-play on acquiring language structure or reading comprehension. However, at least at the Iranian national scale, few projects

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have been conducted on investigating the impact of TBLT on speaking ability. As a result, the present research attempts to exhibit the effect of role-play, as a task-based technique on EFL learners' speaking ability.

3. Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of task-based instruction on listening, reading and structures but little research has addressed the effect of role-play on learners' speaking ability. Although the term role play per se may not seem a brand new concept to study; however, the context in which it was implemented seems different in TBLT in that role play is enriched contextually.

Role-play was thought to create the atmosphere for learners to practice social contexts of the communication. Nevertheless, the obvious gap between theoretical advocating and practical reality made us conscious about such propositions. Accordingly, this study intended to determine to what extent role play activity based on task-based language teaching would influence EFL learners' speaking ability and whether it would be able to improve this skill. In so doing, the subjects go through the three stages of TBLT design, i.e. pre-task, during task, and post-task cycles. During pre-task phase, they became familiar with something like what is to take place in the task cycle. Actually, they were preparing for the main task. Next, they were assigned roles to play while carrying cards with roles on. The roles had been developed as closely as possible to real situations. And, through post-task stage, the subjects were required to perform the task, i.e. role-play activities, for the second time. In addition, they paid more attention to form.

4 Research Question

Drawing upon the issue under study, the present research seeks answer to the following question:

1. Does TBLT-oriented role-play make any considerable change in the subjects' speaking ability in the experimental group compared with that of the control group?

5 Research Hypothesis

According to the question cited above, the study particularly aims at testing the following null hypothesis:

1. Role play relying on TBLT leaves no effect on subjects' speaking ability in the experimental group compared with that of the control group.

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6. Methodology

6.1 Design

In conducting the present study an experimental research method was adopted. Farhady (1995) draws the schematic pattern of such kind of research as follows:

Random Sampling

→ Cont. Group → Pretest → Placebo → Posttest
→ Exp. Group → Pretest → Treatment → Posttest

6.2 Participants

EFL sophomores studying in different universities in the city of Ilam-Iran constituted the intended population. Out of this population 60 learners were randomly selected for the purpose of the study. To account for the homogeneity of the subjects, IELTS speaking measure was implemented. Based on their scores on IELTS, the candidates were ranked from the highest to the lowest. Regardless of the gender of the candidates, every other subject was placed in experimental and control groups according to their scores from the top to the bottom. The age of the selected subjects who were 40 female and 20 male students ranged from 18 to 30.

6.3 Materials

The main materials applied for the experimental group were cards containing roles to be practiced in the class on the basis of TBLT considerations. The participants in the control group did not experience working with TBLT-based role play cards. Instead, they were given materials based on traditional methods of teaching a foreign language.

6.4 Instrument

As mentioned so far, to measure the subjects' speaking ability, the study has utilized IELTS speaking in its pretest and posttest. It is a test of academic and vocational English, produced by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), and jointly managed by the British Council and IDP Australia. The test included three sections. In section 1, which lasted 4-5 minutes, the candidate answered general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of similar familiar topic areas. In section 2 (3-4 minutes) the candidate was asked to speak for one to two minutes on a particular topic. The topic was written on a card, and the candidate had one minute to prepare for the talk. S/he was asked one or two follow-up questions. In phase 3 (4-5 minutes) the examiner and candidate discussed issues and concepts thematically linked

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to section 2. The test lasted for 11-14 minutes and candidates were assessed for their performance on a 0-9 scale.

From among the reasons for choosing this instrument was that it is accepted at international scale. Leading Universities in USA, UK and Canada have recognized it as a reliable and valid test (See IELTS Teaching Resources, 2006) and it observed comprehensive criteria, including fluency, accuracy, lexicon, and pronunciation, to assess speaking skill which suited the very purpose of the study.

6.5 Procedure

The experiment lasted two months through which both experimental and control group participated in their classes twice a week. As stated earlier, role-play cards were provided and assigned to the subjects in the experimental group. They were developed according to TBLT conditions and those in the experimental group were asked to play the roles described on each card. The subjects in the control group followed the materials provided for them based on traditional methods of language teaching without encountering TBLT-adopted role-play cards. At the end of the study, IELTS speaking was run for the second time as the posttest.

7 Data Collection and Analysis

Following the implementation of IELTS speaking in pre test stage, the recorded samples of the subjects' performance were assessed by four raters and two raters with the closest means of scores were selected for both pre and post test assessment. Next, to guarantee the reliability of the rating process, inter-rater reliability was computed. It was roughly 0.70 which appeared as an acceptable value of inter-rater reliability.

In conducting the present study a series of statistical operations were applied. First, the means, standard deviation, and variance of the two groups in the pretest were calculated. Then, a t-test was run to see if the selected group were homogeneous. Later, the same procedure was also followed for post test to see if any significant difference could be found between subjects achievement or if the hypothesis could be rejected.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Result of the Pretest.

Groups	N	\bar{X}	SD	V
EXP.	30	3.30	.466	.217
CONT.	30	3.23	.504	.254

As Table 1 reveals, the experimental and control groups had rather similar means, standard deviations and variances which prove the fairness of the selection and sampling process. Next, an independent t-test was run

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to see if there was a significant difference between students performance on pretest. Table 2 reveals the result of t-test for both groups in the pretest.

Table 2. t-test Computed for Both Groups in the Pretest

	F	Sig.	t	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score Equal Variances assumed	.032	.859	.532	58	.597
Equal Variances not assumed			.532	57.649	.597

As the table indicates, the value of t-observed ($t=.532$, $DF=58$, $p<.05$) is less than the t-critical value 2.02 at the significant level of .05. Thus, the reported t. value is an acceptable criterion for the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups. It also shows that there was not a significant difference between the groups in their entry behavior.

After two months of treatment both groups participated in the post test. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics for the post test performance.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Result of the Post-test

Group	N	\bar{x}	SD	V
EXP.	30	3.53	507.	.257
CONT.	30	3.26	449	.202

As the data represent, the groups performed differently on the test. It seems that experimental group outperformed the control group. To see if the difference between the means of the experimental group and the control group was meaningful, another independent t. test was computed. The result of the computation is presented in table 4.

Table 4. Independent t-test for Both Groups in the Post-test.

	F	Sig.	t	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score Equal Variances Assumed	7.552	.008	2.154	58	.035
Equal Variances not assumed			2.154	57.177	.035

Considering the data shown above, since the t-observed ($t.=2.154$, $DF=58$, $P>.05$) exceeded the t-critical of 2.02, the result of computed independent t-test is convincing enough to reject the null hypothesis. In other words, the result confirmed the difference between the two groups and the positive effect of Task Based Language Teaching oriented role-play technique. It also reveals that the experimental group has outperformed the control group.

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9 Conclusions

As noted earlier, the present study aimed at empirically investigating the effects of 'Role Play' as a TBLT-centered activity and whether it can improve EFL learners' oral ability. Adopting this technique and running the procedure for a period of two months generated noteworthy results. According to the obtained results, the theoretical claims of TBLT regarding enhancing EFL candidates' oral ability were empirically proved true.

With respect to the practice level, as it was put forth in the previous section, the participants in the experimental group performed better than those in the control group. In other words, the results extracted from the findings of the study made it certain that role-play, as underlined and recommended by many experts in the field, was practically shown to be an effective and fruitful activity for English learning courses.

While a lot more studies are required to be conducted in order to display the impacts of activities included in TBLT, on the basis of this paper, it could be possible to state that role-play technique directed by TBLT is effective in helping learners to upgrade their oral ability, at least at the Iranian EFL context. Therefore, it is recommended that this activity along with TBLT guidelines be included among various activities in courses intended for improving learners' oral skills.

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