

## **IMPROVING SPEAKING THROUGH ROLE PLAYS AND DRAMATIZATION**

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**F**requently, in our English classes, we observe our students working on some tasks and some questions come to our minds: Are we using good procedures to teach English?. Are they effective ways to learn English? and in general: What can we do in order to improve English learning?. These reflections belong to a wide field of research. We concentrated on one of the skills that we consider basic to develop the overall improvement of English as a second language: speaking. After some pedagogical reflections concerning oral activities in the classroom, we chose some role-plays and dramatizations to determine their impact on students' oral production and the effect they may have on students' learning processes.

### **Introduction**

We were very interested in using effective techniques to improve our teaching and the learning process in the classroom. We were conscious that they must be in accordance with the individual characteristics of the students and their specific needs. After the analysis of this situation we began to look for the best procedures to help students develop speaking in an effective way. So, based on our previous experiences, we chose role-plays and dramatizations because they had some characteristics that we considered important to solve our main issue. We wanted to determine the effect of role-plays in students' speaking and what kind of factors influence students' willingness to dramatize.

We were concerned with this matter because the students saw English as an isolated subject with no great relevance in their lives. They were not conscious of the importance of learning English as a means of interaction with other classmates. Also, we could observe that the students seldom use English in the classroom because they did not have English classes before, so, it was difficult for them to produce a short oral message with just the few words given by the teacher.

In order to develop our project, we chose relevant topics according to students' lives and then, after each topic, they acted out role-plays and dramatizations related to the issue: greetings, family photo album, fashion show, speaking by telephone, free dramatization.

In addition, we decided to use the action research method because it helped us observe the impact of role-plays and dramatizations in students on a constant basis. This way, we could make changes, look for new aids that improve these activities and, finally, we could analyze the results. Through direct observation, questionnaires and videos we could detect students' attitude, participation level, use of vocabulary, aids to dramatize, environment to dramatize, pronunciation, creativity, spontaneity and roles that students enjoy.

### **Field of Action**

We developed our research project at C.E.D. San Luis S.O., a school that is located in the

Southeast of Bogotá, in Los Libertadores neighborhood. This is a small public institution for children with low economic status. There, we find boys and girls of different ages, different family structure and different problems.

For our research, we selected the third grade because of its special characteristics. It was a well-motivated course in which students liked English and enjoyed the class, although they scarcely participated orally or spoke in English. Their performance was limited to some songs or rhymes. The students were seven to twelve years old. An important thing to take into account was that they did not have English before this year, so, their level was very low.

### Conclusions

Through the implementation of this project we can conclude that role plays and dramatizations are good activities for developing speaking in a funny and interesting way because these permit students to use the language in communicative situations related to their lives, such as greetings, family album, clothes and weather. While we developed these activities, we could detect the progress in the students' oral production. Before we implemented these strategies, the students just sang isolated songs, said rhymes and words, and after the implementation of role-plays and dramatizations, they spoke frequently of situations in context. For instance, when they expressed their feelings about presentations or when they helped each other remember what to say.

It was very gratifying to observe students' attitude and aptitude when they developed these activities. All children participated in role-plays and dramatizations and they were very interested not only in their own presentations but in their classmates' too. Their happy faces, their

enthusiasm, their applauses after each presentation, were great for us.

Role plays and dramatizations are activities that students enjoy a lot not only because they like to dress in different ways, make faces and imagine that they are different people, but also because they can internalize and use English expressions. (Holden: 1985). We could appreciate this situation when the students showed interest and enthusiasm to participate, and, in the presentations, they were coherent, although in some cases, some children did not match the questions to the right answers. It was evident when a couple of the students were acting "The Family Album". A student asked, "Who is he?" and her partner answered, "He is wearing my father".

As Kenneth Chastain (1988), we consider as other researchers that "People learn to do things by doing things..." so, we can say that students learn to speak by speaking in a real context, and role plays and dramatizations are useful tools to make it possible. It is not relevant at all that students speak fluently but that they can communicate using L2. After some dramatizations, our students recognized that in spite of certain difficulties, they could understand and be understood. As a sample we have the answer of one student: "¿Comprendiste lo que se habló en la dramatización?". "Si, porque cuando los niños disian wtah llu eri sabemos que era que tienes de ropa".

Role-plays and dramatizations are effective activities to help students develop speaking; however, it is necessary to complement these by using aids such as clothing and other elements to make the situation more real. In other words, we should create an appropriate environment in which students feel secure and are able to speak naturally. For instance, in our project we noticed that the students had better performances when they acted

out the role play “Telephone Conversation in Different Cities” than in the previous role-plays because, in this case, they were wearing clothes according to the weather, they used telephones and the classroom was decorated with posters according to the situation.

In addition, it is necessary that the teacher give students input according to the topic to provide them with enough knowledge to represent the situation in a better way using different expressions. We could notice that in this school, the teacher’s input is not only necessary, but relevant since they do not have any other help around them like television, relatives or friends who have some English knowledge. For example, when we asked them to create individual dramatizations, they could not do it and just repeated the model given by the teacher.

As we developed our project with children, we could observe that it was very important for them to be noticed by the teacher. The positive attitude of the teacher and the classmates was of vital importance for children to feel that they were doing things well and that their job was recognized (Harmer: 1988). Students felt motivated and showed more interest in participating in dramatizations when their classmates and teachers applauded them, said “*very good*” and whistled at them demonstrating their approval after their presentations. Students always looked at the teacher, not only for her recognition, but also for her help in remembering the forgotten words and/or lines.

As teachers, we have to take into account that in order to obtain effective results in speaking through dramatizations and role plays, it is very important to support them with an appropriate environment, good and useful resources, enough teacher’s input and teacher’s recognition of children’s work.

Role-plays and dramatizations are activities that not only have the benefits mentioned above, but also have other implications that help the teaching process. One of these is that they promote team interaction and cooperative learning. Another aspect is that they can be used with students at different levels and ages and, at the same time, can be adapted to different topics according to the students’ context. As a third aspect, we can mention that role plays and dramatizations are useful to develop and increase children’s self-esteem and confidence to speak and participate in front of their classmates, especially for shy students.

We should say, that in spite of the benefits of these activities we will face some difficulties in their implementation. For example, it is possible that the children do not have enough initiative to create new situations to dramatize and use new words and expressions in English. In that case, the teacher could feel frustrated about the results. For that reason, it is necessary from the beginning of the implementation of role-plays and dramatizations, that the teacher motivate students by giving them different ideas about resources, situations and expressions that they can use while acting out.

## References

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