

Role Play Technique in Teaching Scientific English: A Short Guide for Busy Teachers

Giuseppe Giordano, MD (giugiordano1969@alice.it)

Department of Mental Health, ASL 2 Azienda sociosanitaria ligure, Savona, Italy

Giovanna Giordano, Istituto di Istruzione Superiore "Cigna - Baruffi - Garelli", Mondovì, CN, Italy



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Abstract: *Role-playing is a valid technique used in English language learning contexts that has demonstrated a positive impact in improving learners' speaking skills. It gives the students a good opportunity to explore and practice different situations of real life and enables them to speak in a more accurate, amusing, and confident way as well as let them focus mainly on communication rather than grammar. This paper is basically a presentation of three scenarios that have been used by the authors during Scientific English courses in secondary and tertiary education contexts at a local university. These courses were generally short in duration (a total of 12-16 hours) and were focused mainly on the improvement of productive skills, writing and speaking. The role play activities performed by students with the teacher's support and supervision were beneficial to the enhancement of speaking abilities as well as stimulate students' creativity and peer-to-peer interaction.*

Keywords: EAP, ELT, ESP, Role-Playing, Scientific English, Speaking Skills

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Introduction

The improvement of speaking skills and communicative abilities in English can be very challenging especially at university where students are required to prepare oral presentations and share their academic knowledge in the targeted language L2. Incorporating role-playing activities into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production. It can be an integral part of the class and not a one-time or single event (Ladousse, 1987). Teachers should be aware that the activity will be very useful and if the necessary support is provided (teacher as facilitator, spectator and participant), it can be very successful.

Using role play techniques can be helpful to enhance students' motivation and confidence to speak in English to their teacher, to other learners and to a hypothetical audience (Burenova, 2015), especially if used along with other pedagogical approaches to language teaching. Most important, this method helps students to communicate successfully in their future professional environments. The effective role of role-playing activities in educational environments is broadly discussed by Shapiro & Leopold (2012) who underlined the fact that the practicing and playing a second language favours the student's cognitive and linguistic growth. Moreover, the authors argue that the pre-task activities organised to prepare learners to better engage in the activity and the role playing itself are fundamental to favour intellectual engagement, to promote higher-order thinking skills, and to facilitate language acquisition in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms.

There are many studies that confirm the benefits for second language learners in different academic contexts. In one study (Islam, 2012) the investigation shows learners' improvement in speaking skills through role-playing and how the positive attitudes of teachers help to further their speaking skills. The authors deduced that this technique has been enthusiastically accepted by the students as it challenges their creativity and ability to think critically. About seventy percent of students said that the role plays helped increase their speaking ability and that they could express their creativity more than in other activities. About fifty percent students found it to be an easy method to communicate as they had complete freedom to select the vocabulary. Only ten percent found it difficult as they felt shy to act and speak in public. In another study conducted at two Ukrainian universities (Kostikova, 2019), English

learners were recruited to analyse the effectiveness of role-playing games for the development of English fluency and skills. The authors analysed the effectiveness of these activities (also named gamification) in a sample of 240 students who were divided randomly in two groups labelled the experimental group and the control group. The English proficiency level of the students of the two groups was then measured and evaluated by using language assessment tests adapted to the academic context that is Legal English. In the end, the experimental group demonstrated better results in all the areas investigated: speaking abilities, vocabulary knowledge, and listening skills.

The purpose of this paper is to provide three role play scenarios that have been performed in Scientific English classrooms which teachers can use a template for their students in secondary and tertiary education. It must be clear that the models shown here should be adapted to the subject of study (i.e., medicine, physics, biology, etc.) and to the students' language level. The following scenarios were used with a group of learners, whose language proficiency was mainly upper-intermediate, B2, and who attended medical and schools and performed psychological studies. They are meant as a guide for teachers who may have little time to prepare a lesson using this learning method.

Role Playing Scenarios

Scenario 1: Job Interview for a Healthcare Position

In the first scenario there are two roles to play. A first role is performed by the student who is the candidate for a job position (i.e., doctor, nurse, occupational therapist) while the second role is played by the teacher who acts as the interviewer. Of course, teachers get students ready for this type of role play by teaching them in advance the following tasks:

- How to write a cover letter for a job application
- How to draft a successful CV/Resume in English
- How to get ready for a job interview (face-to-face)

There are many free websites containing useful hints on how to prepare a cover letter:

See <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/cvs-and-cover-letters/cover-letters> or

Check <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/covering-letter>), write a CV

See <https://europa.eu/europass/en/create-europass-cv> or

Check <https://www.careers.govt.nz/job-hunting/cvs-and-cover-letters/how-to-write-a-cv/> and

Getting ready for a job interview: See <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/how-to-prepare-for-an-interview> or

Check <https://www.roberthalf.com.au/career-advice/interview>).

The goal here is to teach students these three preliminary activities, let them prepare their own cover letters and CV and learn about the different steps of a possible job interview.

The following is an example of a job interview that may be used during a role play for students attending a Scientific English course at university.

Teacher (interviewer): Good morning Mr/Ms I am Mr/Ms Head of the Human Resource Management Office here at the hospital of Welcome to our institution.

Student (interviewee): Good morning sir/Mme. Pleased to meet you.

T: So, you have applied for a position as Why are you interested in working at this hospital as a?

S: Well, I think that my previous education and professional experience make me a good candidate for the position advertised on your institution's website. Erm ... I know that your hospital has a great research interest in, a scientific field which I am very interested in. As you can see from my CV ...

T: Yes, I have your CV here which is very detailed and informative, but I would like to know more about your previous job experience. You wrote in the CV that you have worked part-time for ...

S: Oh yes, that was a great opportunity for me because I could work as an internship in the laboratory/unit/service held by Prof. at the University of who is an expert in the field of..... I worked there about eight months last year after graduation.

T: Very good! And what are about your skills? Are you familiar with Health Informatics Programs?

S: Actually, no but I learn very easily and never had problems when dealing with new software during my previous internship.

T: Excellent! Now let's discuss another important aspect here at this hospital. You must know that most of our job is done in a team. How would you feel about working in a group?

S: No problem for me. I am used to work with other colleagues and try always to get along well with them.

T: Ok, a last question. If you were selected as our preferred candidate, when could you possibly start working with us?

S: If my application were successful, I think we can find an agreement on when to start.

T: Ok, that's all, thanks for coming. You will receive a message from the HRO shortly after our interview informing you about the result of this interview. Good luck!

S. Thanks, goodbye Mr/Ms!

Scenario 2: Application Interview for a PhD Research Programme

In this second scenario there are three roles to play. The first role is that of a student (S) who is the applicant does a PhD interview, while the other two roles concerns the interviewers of which one is the senior researcher of a university played by the teacher (I1) and the second one is the role of an assistant researcher performed by another student (I2), In this way, more students are involved actively in this task, which may be more stimulating and motivating for the group of learners as there is more interaction with the teacher and other peers. As for the preceding scenario, some pre-task learning is necessary including mainly the teaching of how to prepare for this type of interview. There is plenty of free material available on internet which to refer to such as:

<https://www.findaphd.com/guides/phd-interview>,

<https://www.science.org/content/article/ace-your-phd-program-interviews-prepare-answer-and-ask-these-key-questions>,

<https://www.profellow.com/tips/how-to-prepare-for-a-phd-interview-step-by-step/>.

The student can find here useful information on how to perform and succeed at a PhD interview.

Here is an example of an interview referring to a doctor applying for a PhD research degree. It was used during a Scientific English lesson in which medical students were attending their first year of post-graduate diploma.

I1: Good morning Mr/Ms and welcome to the university of ... I am Professor and this is my assistant, Dr. Nice to meet you!

S: Good morning to you.

I1: So, you sent your application for the Research degree in What made you choose to do a PhD at our institution?

S: I have always been interested in the study of since I started my MA in at the University of which gave me the opportunity to increase my knowledge in this scientific field. As a matter of fact, I worked on a final dissertation in this area which was very much appreciated by the academic staff. I've enjoyed my academic work so far, but I really feel I've got more to offer as an independent researcher. I'm very passionate about this subject and think that not enough attention has been paid to the questions I'm looking to address.

I1: Very good. And what questions would you like to deal with? What are your main interests?

S: Yes. I'm interested in researching the problems related to, a topic about which I've already published several articles in international journals with the collaboration of my previous tutors. I have also attended many conferences and workshops on this topic either in person or online. Now, I'd like to dedicate myself to a project that involves specific areas of my research in your academic environment that I find very stimulating and challenging.

I2: I have read some of your research papers and found them very interesting, especially the one on and I see you reached great achievements in this field, but I have another question. What do you plan to do after you complete your PhD?

S: I think my PhD project can unfold new lines of inquiry for this field and would like to establish the foundation for a fruitful research career. But I'm also interested in other opportunities included in this doctoral programme as I'd like to become an academic. I might be also interested in a postdoctoral fellowship or in a position as research associate.

I1: Very well, Mr/Ms And now, what you please tell us about your points of strength and your weaknesses?

S: I feel that one of my strengths is my ability to write and communicate my research results. My previous academic work demonstrates my aptitude to present ideas and concepts in a clear and concise way. I think this will help me deal with the amount of information my PhD research needs to cover and then with writing an effective thesis. I also like to work in a team with other colleagues because I think that sharing ideas and collaborating on a same project can be challenging and enriching. Sometimes, I linger over secondary, though not less important, aspects of a research project but I think that with the support of your institution this problem can certainly be ameliorated.

I2: Ok, that's good. Now let's move to another point. Can you explain your project in detail and tell us what impact can it bring?

S: Yes, my project is basically oriented towards the investigation of in relation to I believe that the results of my research can find their application in many areas such as education/medical treatment/social services and provide significant advances in research programmes as well.

I1: Excellent. A final question: What makes you the right candidate for this PhD?

S: I am a reliable person who is cooperative with colleagues and trustworthy. I respect deadlines and like to plan ahead. My previous education in the specific area of study and personal expertise make me the right scholar for this research degree.

I2: Well done, Mr/Ms We have more applicants to interview today. If your application is successful, you'll hear from us very soon.

S: Thanks Mr/Ms. I wish you a nice day.

Scenario 3: Phone Interview for an MA Degree

In the last role play, the activity suggested by the teacher is a phone interview to discuss a person's application for a Master of Arts (MA) programme course. In this scenario, two students are asked to play the roles of interviewer (S1) and applicant (S2) while the teacher, left outside the speaking activity, ask, monitors the interview, and intervenes when necessary to give suggestions or to correct any mistakes. Students may experience a certain degree of autonomy, feel less dependent on their instructor, and may increase their levels of self-esteem, motivation and personal initiative. Some pre-task teaching is clearly required here. Teachers can find useful hints on how to prepare learners for this activity at the following websites:

<https://www.topinterview.com/interview-advice/how-to-prepare-for-a-phone-interview>

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/dos-and-donts-of-phone-interview>

<https://www.careermatch.com/job-prep/interviews/prepare-for-phone-interviews/>

An example of a phone interview to discuss an MA application is provided in the following transcript from an activity used during a lesson with psychology students attending the last year of a second-level degree in Clinical psychology.

S1: Hello, this is John from the university of Are you Susan On the phone?

S2: Yes, it's me. Nice to hear you.

S1: The pleasure is mine. So, this phone interview is mainly a discussion about your application to study for the MA degree in Health Psychology.

S2: Yes, that's clear.

S1: Good! Why are you interested in this programme? Tell me about your previous studies and knowledge of the topic.

S2: Well, I have always been interested in the Health Psychology since I started my B.A. in Psychology three years ago. During my previous studies, I had the opportunity to volunteer at the Department of .. of the university of I took part to the collection of data, analyse laboratory tests and evaluate the final results of a research in psychological issues related to Covid-19 restriction rules during the pandemic. Moreover, I assisted an intern in preparing a presentation for on-campus workshop.

S1: very good. And did you publish anything in this field as a co-author, for example?

S2: No, actually, I didn't but at the moment I am writing an brie report on the emotional impact of which I hope I'll be able to publish soon on an e-journal which is specialised in this field of research.

S1: Excellent! Now, I'll give some details of the programme for which you have applied. It's a two-year degree consisting of six 20-credits modules plus a 60-credits dissertation on a topic of your choice. The modules are generally split over 4 semesters and students are asked to complete the final thesis during the summer term of the second year. All this information is available on the university website.

S2: Yes, I read about it on you're the MA page.

S1: Do you have any questions so far?

S2. Well...erm.. I'd like to know if I'll be assigned to a tutor or supervisor.

S1: Of course, you will I'm one of the three tutors for this course but can't tell you at the moment if I'll be your tutor throughout the entire course. Usually, students are assigned randomly.

S2: I see, and what about in the entry requirements. Do I need to prove my English language proficiency?

S1: Yes, this is required to all students whose previous studies were made in a non-English speaking country. If you don't have a formal language level test you may choose to attend one of our Academic English courses which are commonly given on the beginning of the first term. A last question, how are you funding your studies? Do you have a sponsor?

S2: No, I am self-funded, luckily.

S1: Good... Ok our interview has finished. In my opinion, it was successful. You will receive shortly an offer letter from the Admissions office with all the information about the programme including accommodation and fee payment methods. Hope to see you at start of the autumn term and goodbye!

S2: Thank you very much John. Goodbye!

Conclusion

The validity of role play technique is widely demonstrated in ELT. The beneficial impact on students' speaking skills, social interaction and communicative styles is strongly confirmed by several studies having an interest on this topic. The technique is useful also in increasing the relationship between students and teacher, thus contributing to the establishment of an enjoyable and positive rapport. The scenarios presented in this paper are an example of activities that can be used in academic contexts where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is taught with the aim to improve learners' speaking skills, problem-solving and group working abilities together with critical thinking. At the end of the activities, students were invited to reflect on the task performed and encouraged to discuss about their participation and the issues that could have possibly emerged.

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