PEDAGOGY

Council at Fili Transferred to a University Classroom

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Abstract. The article discusses a role-play offered to university students of a history faculty in the framework of a meaning-focused speaking activity in the ESP class conducted in a zoom session. The motivation stimulated in students by this productive task fuelled their interest in the topic of the lesson and enhanced their enthusiasm to discuss the historical issues which the role play centred around. The study also looks into the possible implications for the use of task-based method in ESP lessons of history students and the benefits of the role play as a task, stimulating the students to concentrate on a close-to-real-life meaning-focused activity..
Keywords: ESP, role-play, meaning-focused speaking, motivation, vocabulary acquisition.

Introduction. When finding out about a person's mastery of a language, we traditionally ask if they 'speak' the language. Speaking is viewed as a cornerstone of linguistic skills and is therefore of paramount importance for university students' future career and successful communication. Thus various activities aimed at improving students' speaking competence constitute a significant part of a foreign language teacher's agenda.

In recent years, the educational use of role-play has become more widespread. According to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodologists, real life situations, which act as a basis for speaking tasks, prove particularly effective for meaningful language exchange in the classroom, therefore, task-based learning makes up a whole strategy within the field of the English language instruction. The role-play introduced into an ESP class provides students with opportunities to showcase both their knowledge of the subject matter and their English skills, which further enhances the learners' motivation and interest in engaging with a foreign language.

A brief overview of relevant publications. Apart from purely linguistic benefits, scholars point out other advantages that the role-play can contribute into learning. For example, Newmark (1966) observes that a dramatic situation, which serves as a setting for the role-play, calls for students' empathy when they support each other, reduces their boredom, and expands the classroom indefinitely to embrace a variety of natural contexts for the language use [6].

Richards (2006) maintains that students learn language effectively if they interact with other language users in different contexts to negotiate meaning. He promotes group work, role-play, and project work as well-known activities of EFL studies and emphasizes that these activities cause an information gap which is then narrowed by communication. Because the focus of these activities is to negotiate meaning, they increase the learners' chances to get involved in learning and acquire the language [7].

Harmer (2001) argues that role-play should be part of classroom activities for three reasons: 1) it is fun and motivating; 2) quieter students get the chance to express themselves in a more direct way; 3) the world of the classroom is broadened to include the outside word [2].

According to Scrivener (2009), the concept of role-play should also include that of real-play. The latter occurs when situations and characters of the role play are drawn not from materials prepared for the students but from their own life and the world [9].

Nation and Newton (2009) point out several causes which may lead to students' unwillingness to speak English, which include "inadequate vocabulary, limited control of grammar, lack of fluency, learners' shyness, and lack of encouragement" [5, p.112]. Jackson and Back (as cited in Rojas & Villafuerte, 2018), however, observe that the role-play stimulates the teacher to "create a safe learning environment; provide constructive and goal-directed feedback; and cultivate the ability to communicate" [4, p.3].

Michael Long (cited in Branden, 2016) states that frequently EFL instruction tends to approach language as a a mechanic system of rules in a decontextualised way. Learners are often taught a lexical item or a grammar rule and are then asked to practise it in sentences not related to their real-life situations. Not until they master these constructions are they allowed to use the corresponding lexis and grammar communicatively. Long argues that what this approach does is not related to how people naturally learn a language. In the natural environment people try to communicate productively from the earliest stage of language learning. Tourists who might know only a couple of basic expressions in a target language strive to to pick up words and phrases that will be handy in a foreign country; teenagers playing a computer game will be highly motivated to learn the vocabulary they need to make themselves understood by their teammates; immigrants who aspire to find a job in their new homeland will try to undetsrand and produce messages related to their profession [1]. This all leads to concluding that role-play may be viewed as a task which stimulates learners to use the language in a situation close to the one they are likely to experience in real life outside of the EFL classroom. Quoting Huang (2008), teaching agendas which feature the role-play stimulate a more adequate environment for language instruction and help students to speak it in a more realistic way [3].

At the same time, ESP speaking is different from that conducted in the regular EFL classroom because the topics of speaking tasks in such classes are related to the

students' subject matter, i.e. history in this case, which narrows down the range of possible situations suitable for role plays.

Thus, the **purpose of this article** is to look into possible advantages of the role-play in an ESP university class of history students, when the historical events discussed are particularly suitable for the introduction of such activity, and to discuss how technically a role-play can be conducted under the online mode of learning in a zoom session.

Description of the main material. The recent ESP classes conducted online in the group of third-year students of the faculty of history focused on the Napoleonic Wars and the 1812 Russian campaign. The latter offered a not-to-be-missed opportunity for a role-play, which is the Council at Fili. The discussion whether to leave Moscow to the French Army after the Battle of Borodino or to give the French another battle at the threshold of Moscow was run by commander Mikhail Kutuzov and several prominent generals of his army in the village of Fili near Moscow. The council was familiar to the students, as it is believed to be one of the major events in Napoleon's Russian campaign, and besides, it had been discussed by the students in their regular history classes. So at the pre-speaking stage we refreshed their knowledge of the sequence of Napoleon's march from the border of the Russian empire to Moscow, the outcomes of the battle of Borodino, and the setting and goals of the Council at Fili.

To get the students to feel the atmosphere of the council they were shown a painting by Alexei Savrasov, which features the hut where the council had occurred, and a painting by Alexei Kivshenko showing the generals in the middle of the conversation. Such pre-speaking stage is indispensable to activate the students' background knowledge of the subject, and fuel their interest in the forthcoming task. In the next stage the learners were offered a gist of the generals' speeches and the sequence of their utterances adapted from Wikipedia. The students read the text to familiarize themselves with the lexis to be used in their forthcoming role-play. As I planned to split my group of 12 students into three subgroups of four learners, I had shortened the script to four main speakers at the council: generals Kutuzov, Barclay de Tolly, Bennigsen, and Raevsky. For the task, the students were divided into breakout groups of four in our zoom session, in which they had to provide a dramatized script of the council and then enact it as a group by distributing the roles among them. I visited the groups one after another to provide scaffolding in case students experienced any difficulties with the task.

In the next stage the learners presented their scripts for the whole group, and other students had to listen to them and figure out which character had been enacted by which student. This task aimed at engaging the students' interest in both presenting their own work and listening to their groupmates' role-plays. After the group enjoyed listening to presentations and the learners were praised for their good job, we reflected on the lexis used by the group, pronunciation flaws, and possibilities of improving the script. Overall, the role-play proved beneficial for the group, as it both boosted the learners' interest in the topic under discussion and provided an engaging opportunity to change the routine of their classes, to get inside history and try the role of real historical personalities, and feel the fabric of history better. Furthermore, the learners had a chance to work as teams and boost their communication skills by supporting each other, exchanging ideas and provide precious peer correction while on the task. The role-play actually provided three opportunities to correct the learners' language flaws, or three corrective styles: practised by themselves in a group, provided by the teacher, who monitored the groups preparing the script, and as a post-task whole-group discussion. Thus, the learners must have had a chance to process and reflect on their linguistic experience better.

Conclusions. It is maintained by EFL methodologists that the role-play is a useful tool to get students to develop their speaking skills by engaging in a task closely imitating a real-life situation, where learners can demonstrate their language skills and creative potential. Active participation in teamwork, indispensable for the role-play, is in line with contemporary learner-centred approach to language instruction, which stimulates students to feel as active agents in the course of their studies and assume responsibility for their learning outcomes. The subject of the role-play, which corresponds to the learners' real-life interests or the main disciplines (in case of university students), promotes meaningful language exchange necessary for students to feel motivated to use a foreign language. The role-play enhances the learners' both social and linguistic skills by getting them to cooperate during their work on the task.

To sum up, introducing the role-play in ESP university classes can be viewed as a stimulating tool to motivate learners for productive tasks, as it combines a cognitive aspect with entertainment and fun. It can promote the task of using L2 in class, which may otherwise appear too challenging due to the complexity of the learners' subject matter. Such sort of materials will often combine discussing a serious academic issue with elements of acting.

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