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Shedding the ego: drama-based role-play and identity in distance language tuition

Bärbel Brash* and Sylvia Warnecke

Faculty of Education and Language Studies, Open University in Scotland, 10 Drumsheugh Gardens, Edinburgh, EH3 7QJ, UK

In this article, the authors attempt to answer the following questions: How do we understand role-play? How are role-play and identity linked? What are the purposes, benefits and challenges of role-play as a teaching tool? What are the roles of students and teachers in role-play? What does role-play add to telephone tutorials and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials?

The article contextualises the wide range of definitions of role-play and points to Cockett's understanding of drama-based role-play as a creative and learner-centred activity in the language classroom. Identity is viewed against the background of social constructionist identity theories and Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'third space'.

The authors explore the benefits and challenges of drama-based role-play for the psycholinguistic, cognitive and educational development of language learners and highlight the changed role of the teacher in this scenario. The comparison of drama-based role-play in face-to-face tuition with telephone as well as online audio-graphic synchronous conferencing confirms that the lack of visual cues often functions as a stimulant and an opportunity for students to shed their ego. At the same time silences take on a new dimension and might afford students a space in which to reinvent themselves in the target language. While drama-based role-play may, on the one hand, be the bridge between first language/first culture and target language/target culture, it can, on the other hand, support teachers in managing a central task of language tuition today: facilitating innovative learning experiences that allow identity formation in second language acquisition.

Introduction

The impetus for this article arose from our experiences teaching on the Open University (OU) language programme. Specific issues with regard to role-play activities emerged from student feedback in face-to-face, telephone conference and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials. Students' comments ranged from 'Role-play is just not for me' to others expressing their enjoyment of the freedom of shedding their own identity and taking on a new role. In continuous assessment tasks, where role-play was required, we became aware that some students chose not to, or found it difficult to, assume the role required and reverted to their own identity.[1] At staff development events, varying views of the validity of role-play were voiced by teaching colleagues, with definitions of role-play ranging from pattern drill to drama.

*Corresponding author. Email: bb85@tutor.open.ac.uk

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These experiences provoked the following questions:

- How do we understand role-play?
- How are role-play and identity linked?
- What are the purposes, benefits and challenges of role-play as a teaching tool?
- What are the roles of students and teachers in role-play?
- What does role-play add to telephone tutorials and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials?

The discussion of these points will be followed by a reflection on our own experiences of using role-play in the teaching of a foreign language.

How do we understand role-play?

In examining our understanding of role-play and the definitions assigned to it, we must acknowledge the sheer range of its conceptualisation and its number of uses. Role-play has been categorised as simulation, role-simulation, drama, scenic play and dramatic play, to name but a few. Kodotchigova (2001) points out that some writers, such as Livingston (1983), try to differentiate between role-play and simulation on the basis of the authenticity of the roles taken by students. Other writers consider role-play as one component or element of simulation (Venugopal 1986; Van Ments 1994) or of drama (Sam 1990). It is not just authenticity of role which is contentious in defining role-play, but also identification with the role.

Furthermore, the use of role-play is not confined to drama and language teaching. It is becoming increasingly popular as a means of skill testing in interviews and for team training. Wishart, Oades and Morris (2007) propose the use of role-play to teach internet safety awareness to children and young adults. There are websites specialising in role-plays for utilisation in corporate or entertainment contexts (e.g. http://www.murderetc.com/).[2] There are even 3D virtual reality worlds such as 'Second Life', which allow people to create their own 'avatar'.[3] Through this avatar they can engage in role-play with millions of other Second Life users.

Role-plays are thus offered within a range of cultural, educational and institutional settings, each with its own influences. This means that the term role-play can be used in different situations with markedly different features. There are some commonalities though: role-play is in all cases inextricably linked to identity and to language.

We found ourselves drawn to the intrinsic dichotomy present in the concept of role-play. Role-plays can be simulated situations, in which students play roles they sometimes have in real life. Role-plays can also encompass pretending to be someone else through roles that you would not play in real life. Reber and Reber (2001, 636) offer the following definition of role-playing: '1. The acting out or performing of a particular role .... 2. The acting out ... of the role one perceives as properly characteristic of oneself'. This dichotomy can thus offer both an experience of fragmentation, given that only one role can be singled out at any one time and consciously performed by the individual, and, at the same time, of continuity, 'production' and connection with the individual's experience and identity to date.

How are role-play and identity linked?

In everyday life we assume roles constantly (depending on the demands of the situation) by taking on different personae, such as mother, daughter, partner, friend, colleague etc. We also assume roles in more formalised contexts such as learning situations. But is our identity simply constituted from the sum of our roles? Stuart Hall (1990, 222) emphasises the fluent nature of identity: 'Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact ..., we should think ... of identity as a "production", which is never complete, always in process ...'

Modern social constructionist identity theorists such as Gergen (1999) and Foucault (1966) claim that we construct our everyday identities through language and social relations. The underlying concept is that the social understanding of a situation is different for everyone, and different identities can be created by different people in response to the same situation. Social constructionists maintain that there is no knowable objective reality, but only our subjective construction of identity in response to situations. Knowledge is derived from the mental constructions of members of a social system, and we create ourselves and our identities through the stories we tell others and ourselves. Our communication does not just include vocabulary but also tone, sentence construction and non-verbal cues. All of these carry meaning. Our identities can also change over time just as society and our relationships change. Social constructionists claim that we do not have one core identity but that we use different identities depending on our interaction with other people and their identities. Our identities are then changeable, multiple and de-centred.

In Homi Bhabha's (1994, 37) concept of the 'third space', identity is constructed and reconstructed just like this. As Bhabha points out: '... third spaces are discursive sites or conditions that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and rehistoricized anew'.

Language becomes central to our construction of identity because it is through language that we construct ways of understanding. We are thus continuously shifting roles. By defining a role we describe a moment in time, a particular circumstance in our lives.

What are the purposes, benefits and challenges of role-play as a teaching tool?

In language teaching a wide range of activities can be considered as role-play. Common examples are transactional activities, such as ordering food in a restaurant, which aim at successful exchange of information, and negotiation-based activities, such as arranging a joint evening activity for a group of people, driven by a mix of standpoints and aiming for consensual conclusion in the group. While these language learning activities are clearly purposeful and beneficial to language learners, we suggest that benefits can be further enhanced by dynamic drama-based role-play scenarios, as suggested by Cockett (2002). According to Cockett, the key aspect of this form of role-play lies in the teacher's role in motivating the group to develop a narrative collaboratively.[4] Participants can choose their roles and develop them in an individual way. Language learners are then engaging in the preparation of the role-play and in playing it. The aspect of playing is as central in this context as the fact that students tell a story together.

It is crucial in Cockett's concept of role-play to provide a 'hook' for participants. He describes this as the tension arising between the surface level of speech and the inner level of thoughts and feelings. Participants are 'hooked' by the disturbance of reality, such as awful mistakes, unfortunate coincidences, extremes of behaviour, embarrassment etc. Drama-based role-play allows participants to play out these emotions but in a 'safe' way because they are fictitious.

Our discussion of the benefits and challenges of drama-based role-play in language teaching contexts led to a number of points.

Firstly, Cockett's drama-based role-play scenarios seem to offer numerous educational advantages in that they let students act in a framework that allows them to overcome their fear of certain emotional, linguistic or social constraints, including language anxiety.[5]

Students are already involved in the preparation of the role-play in that teachers set the scene for it together with the student. They are 'hooked' into it, emotionally involved, and more inclined to work as a team and assist in the process of problem solving. The freedom to switch roles results in their increased willingness to try out new roles, which in turn makes them more resourceful. This kind of role-play seems attractive to participants because they can use language creatively and playfully. It can lessen the feeling of artificiality of the language classroom and may make learning more realistic and meaningful.

Secondly, playing a role takes students away from routine activities and rehearsed language patterns in tutorials and focuses their energy on their own experiences, thus also catering for different types of language learners. Absence of error correction during the activity challenges students to sustain communication for a longer period because participants experience a real need to communicate as opposed to acting out set communication patterns. Students dare to take risks and are willing to make mistakes. They focus on their role and the communication involved rather than on the linguistic accuracy of their statements. In this sense, drama-based role-play mirrors real life as a drama and stimulates authentic conversation.

Thirdly, the situation demands sensitivity and cultural awareness and prepares students for real life in the target country and the unpredictability of what they might experience in linguistic terms. Our students generally have diverse cultural backgrounds, and teachers are therefore faced with the challenge of helping their groups build bridges between their own cultural experiences and the culture of the target language. The multi-layered and highly complex nature of these processes is underlined by the fact that our students have taken on a new role when becoming students of a foreign language. In this role they will try to link their understanding and knowledge of their own culture to new concepts and ideas as well as developing their own perception of another culture. Drama-based role-play allows them to act out their new understanding, and by 'hooking' students into an unusual and unpredictable situation they can test boundaries and cultural sensitivities as well as their linguistic progress in the target language.[6]

Fourthly, drama-based role-play underlines the playfulness of language and works best when students are happy to take risks and move beyond the comfort of their course materials. It enhances an understanding of the usage of grammatical forms in that it highlights the importance of contextualised speech. It often introduces

humour to the learning situation, and can increase motivation and students' self-confidence.

Fifthly, role-play based on a narrative developed by the students themselves can be particularly motivating in distance learning when it is continued over a number of tutorials. This way it will represent a linking element between sessions. It will encourage students to attend tutorials more regularly and it will create a much stronger co-operative spirit within the group.

What are the roles of students and teachers in role-play?

When we ask students to participate in a role-play in language tutorials, we note that they often display a mixed reaction. Some are content because a role allows them to adopt different identities and 'safely' play out what they may encounter when speaking the target language in the country. Some are relieved to leave their own identity behind. Others may not identify with their new roles and, instead, feel anxious or further alienated in the classroom. They may feel unable to cope linguistically with the demands of their new role, or feel restricted by it. Some students may consider role-play too childish, too playful or too dramatic. They may not feel comfortable with the level of risk taking and feel embarrassed. It is crucial, therefore, that the teacher is aware of these different reactions to drama-based role-play and handles them in a sensitive way.

The teacher fulfils a multitude of roles here. Before the role-play the teacher must clarify the purpose of the activity and set the scene. S/he must conduct the preparation stages ensuring that the role-play is relevant and interesting to students. S/he must handle role allocation in a sensitive way by ensuring that every participant feels comfortable with his/her role and by allowing students to withdraw or negotiate. Drama-based role-play allows students with different levels of linguistic competence and confidence to co-operate, and it is important that this is reflected in their role allocation. During the role-play the teacher can be the reserved listener, passive observer or facilitator. S/he can monitor progress unobtrusively. S/he can also be a narrator, motivator or participant. After the role-play s/he will guide follow-up work such as re-playing one scene, re-telling the story in a different person, follow-up writing, discussions, error correction etc.

Since incorrect linguistic structures are not always corrected immediately they might be used repeatedly in a role-play, and follow-up work may become as important as the role-play itself. Teachers also need to be aware that role-play might encourage cultural bias because it could reinforce stereotypes.

We need to acknowledge that, within this framework, the role of the language teacher is vital, as Nicolson and Adams (2008, 3) point out:

> How teachers of distance students and those responsible for their staff development manage speaking skills in the classroom, and the methods and tasks they adopt in the language teaching process, are crucial in minimising difference and sites of conflict or discomfort about identity, in allowing new identity-building to happen and enabling students to create their new third space.

Despite the importance of the teacher's role in facilitating drama-based role-play, this kind of activity is a good example of student-centred methodology because it leaves control largely in the students' hands.

What does role-play add to telephone tutorials and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials?

In the context of distance language learning, where virtual tutorials are used as teaching modes more frequently, Cockett's method at first sight appears to be difficult to implement. Is it feasible to act out the dramatisation of a scenario without visual contact? We believe that the visual element of human communication, however important, can be left aside in this instance. Our experience shows that students often feel more inclined to contribute to discussions in the foreign language in situations where the visual cues are missing. Furthermore, we suggest that the lack of the visual will draw more attention to the language as well as to the auditory elements of communication, a factor which can enhance the participants' language learning experience.

When Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1990, 31) describe foreign language anxiety as 'learners' fear of negative social evaluation' this is perhaps not as pronounced in telephone and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials, where participants cannot readily use otherwise typical visual identity markers (Nicolson and Adams 2008, 6) such as age, appearance, mannerisms, additional needs, marital status etc., to construct a view of other students. This may in turn benefit their psycholinguistic development because students play their roles as distance language learners but can also 're-invent' themselves as somebody very different in Cockett's role-play scenarios, acting 'out of character', without risking censorship from others or even being seen to be 'acting'. This opportunity may increase the students' willingness to take risks.

Relying entirely on auditory elements allows students to develop a unique group identity and fosters co-operation.

Four functions of silences

Silences can, at the same time, provide new challenges and opportunities for both telephone conferencing and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials.

Firstly, silences allow students to contribute more easily. Situations in which it is unclear who will speak next afford more opportunities for all to contribute. It is, however, important that both teachers and students agree together on conventions of contributions. It needs to be clear, for example, whether everyone is allowed to contribute at any time or break a silence at any time.

Secondly, however, silences in conferencing situations may be perceived as more threatening in that they can seem much longer to participants than in real time, and we would advocate that teachers do not allow silences to become too long. Teachers can bridge silences by translating otherwise visual cues (such as a smile) into audible ones (a laugh, a joke), which seems even easier in drama-based role-play that relies on collaboration and continuous communication.

Thirdly, Colette Granger (2004) points out that silences have traditionally been viewed either as a sign that language learners do not comprehend or as a period during which they organise their knowledge of the target language in order to prepare to speak. Granger (2004, 6) adds a possible new dimension to silences in second language acquisition when she says: 'I am interested in reading silence within the second language acquisition process less as an interpretable communicative strategy and more as a manifestation of identity-formation processes'. She views silence as an internal identity struggle as individuals try to sort out their feelings of

loss over their first language and their anxiety at the prospect of an uncertain future in their target language.

Fourthly, silence might arise for technical reasons during telephone conferences and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials, where it is possible to split a tutorial group into smaller groups. The teacher can hear what the individual groups are discussing only by joining them in their room in online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials, which are designed to indicate who is present at all times. This makes it impossible for teachers to monitor progress as unobtrusively as in face-to-face situations. The teacher can appear as a silent observer, which might inhibit students because they might find it difficult to interpret the silence. Thus, the teacher may decide not to join groups and therefore have less impact on the way in which the groups work in non face-to-face situations. In both online audio-graphic synchronous and telephone tutorials, splitting into smaller groups who cannot hear each other can also be time-consuming. However, it allows students to focus only on their own work and avoids feelings of competition between groups. The presentation of the results of group efforts becomes a more valid exercise since students cannot observe the other groups' work.

These four functions of silences need to be considered subject to the caveat that silences in cross-cultural communication need special attention as they differ from culture to culture. While Western cultures, for example, seem to favour speech over silence, this seems to be the reverse in Eastern cultures.

Experiences of the authors with drama-based role-plays

In our own teaching practice, which ranges from face-to-face tuition to telephone and online audio-graphic synchronous conferencing, Cockett's method has taken on a central position. We carried out role-plays following his model and gathered students' as well as colleagues' reactions to this way of working in the real and in the virtual language classroom. Of particular interest for our survey were the expectations of both groups regarding those aspects of role-play they found especially challenging, and possible scenarios students might be interested in for the dramatisation.[7]

On the issue of the validity of role-play as a means of enhancing the language learning experience one student remarked:

> I think that role-play activities are essential for getting to the 'next stage' of language learning, in which it suddenly becomes possible to communicate in the language under study in real time conversational situations. I have studied many languages using many different methods but none have got me to this stage apart from extended class-room role-play. (I have never, however, spent a considerable amount of time living or working in a country where the language being studied is spoken.)[8]

Not all students reacted as optimistically, as it appears to take some time and effort to feel comfortable and confident:

> I wouldn't say I always enjoy role-playing as the role sometimes is opposite or totally different to my own views, ideas or experiences. However, I do believe that it is a good tool:
>
> a. It gives you a starting viewpoint for your discussion and it means that you can try things you wouldn't normally.
>
> b. It can give you an insight into different viewpoints/activities/opinions and forces you to think differently and potentially gives you a better overall understanding of things.

> c. Different types of roles also can make you use the language in a different way/style.
>
> Though role-playing can take you out of your comfort zone, it is done in a controlled manner and for short periods of time. And it is not always a bad thing to leave the comfort zone.

The final sentence of this student's evaluation is especially reassuring, as it confirms our view that students, although initially resisting new challenges or different ways of working, felt a greater sense of achievement once they fully engaged in the role-play.

Interestingly, one student commented that having to perform role-play in his mother tongue appears contrived and de-motivating but that it is less problematic in foreign language acquisition:

> Paradoxically it can be easier to cope psychologically with role-play situations in the context of language-learning. In other role-play contexts, it can be more embarrassing and there is also the suspicion that one may be being manipulated by people with hidden motives (why are they trying to get me to play this role?). In language learning this is not a problem, as it is obvious that the roles are being played in order to facilitate language learning and communication.

Many of our colleagues were intrigued by drama-based role-play and used it in their tutorials. Their feedback underlines our findings about drama-based role-plays as a means of shedding the ego and learning for 'real-life situations':

> In my experience, using language in a 'realistic' situation, e.g. shopping, makes it more fun. I hadn't thought much about students needing the anonymity/safety of a different persona, but plan to use this more online and face-to-face.
>
> I consider it a benefit that students are saying something different, and so becoming familiar with a wider range of language; they are reacting to the unexpected; they are rehearsing for real-life situations that they might meet. And just as importantly: role-plays are fun!

In addition, colleagues value their constructive influence on group dynamics and collaboration:

> When they go well, not only the students' self-confidence improves, but also their feeling of group belonging: they realise that when you work in pairs and groups you can achieve more than when you work on your own.

When we look back to our initial role-play dichotomy, we hope that we have demonstrated how language teachers can encourage their students, through drama-based role-play, to choose not only their own roles in language learning activities but also how much they want to identify with them. Students are already actively involved in the development of the play, which closely connects the preparation stages with the dramatisation. This allows them to feel more in control and comfortable with this setting.

Drama-based role-play is a useful vehicle for language learning, but it needs to be viewed with a caveat as well. We need to ask to what extent students can exert agency (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 2004) in drama-based role-play. Their level of proficiency in the target language can either enhance or be an obstacle to their involvement in the play. It can, on the one hand, be linked to knowledge and thus to power, allowing for greater choices and involvement, or, on the other hand, to a lack of knowledge and choices, thus restricting the formation of a new self.

Conclusion and outlook

With the absence of visual cues in telephone and online audio-graphic synchronous tutorials, taking on a new identity seems to follow a different route. It seems easier for students to reinvent themselves because they are not as openly exposed to reactions and possible evaluations of their new selves by other people.

At the same time, silences take on a new dimension and might afford students a space in which to reinvent themselves in the target language, while drama-based role-play may be the bridge between first language/first culture and target language/target culture.

It may be that these silences afford language learners the space to find their voice and present teachers with a central task of language tuition today: facilitating innovative learning experiences that allow identity formation in second language acquisition.

Kramsch, A'Ness and Lam (2000, 98–99) view this task in relation to the potential of new interactive multimedia-based tools when they say:

> Multimedia and the Internet enable learners to find a voice for themselves at the intersection of multiple time scales, to represent their own version of reality through multimodal texts, and to confront a broad public audience with that reality. ... What gets negotiated via the computer is not only information, but also and importantly 'the representation of self and other'. The use of computers in multimedia environments (including electronic communication) is slowly but surely transforming our conceptions of foreign language learning by changing the very notions of who we are and how we represent ourselves through language.

These changing notions of identity and its representation in blended learning contexts will be the focus of our future research. The multimedia levels of communication such as audio- and video-conferencing, podcasts, wikis, blogs etc. can then be woven together with the multiple timescales of the individual's learning experience, notably in synchronous and asynchronous modes.

Identity representation through language needs to be redefined when, as a result of advances in computer technology, language becomes less bound to printed texts. We will seek to establish whether these developments will have to result in a paradigm shift in modern language teaching.

Notes

1. In one assessment task, where students were required to role-play finding a blind date for one of their friends, one student objected to this task saying 'I would never dream of doing this in real life, and so I cannot do it in this TMA [Tutor Marked Assignment]'.
2. See http://www.murderetc.com.
3. See http://secondlife.com. 'Avatar' in computing terms stands for the 'computer user's representation of himself or herself. The term "avatar" can also refer to the personality connected with the screen name, or handle, of an Internet user'. Quoted from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_%28computing%29 (retrieved 31 March 2008).
4. A similar concept, called storyline telling, is put forward by Stephen Bell (2003). Bell stresses the importance of the teacher's task and points out his/her changed role in this context:

   > The teacher's role is to model good learning procedures by designing good questioning techniques, in other words by example. The students are then encouraged to solve these problems imaginatively, to hypothesise and then to examine their suggested

solutions by testing and research. The teacher is a facilitator, someone learning along with the students, a chairman for their discussions.

5. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1990, 30–31) describe foreign language anxiety as having three components:

> Communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas; fear of negative social evaluation arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impact on others; test anxiety or apprehension over academic evaluation.

6. Even in cases where student groups largely share the same cultural background, we do not consider that this weakens either the impact or the importance of role-play.
7. When questioned about their preferences for scenarios students expressed the view that they benefit from every-day situations just as well as absolutely fictional, entertaining plays:

> I think that many different kinds of role-play activities should be tried. However, some consideration may need to be given in order to help people get through the difficult first 'forming' stage. Perhaps the use of preformed 'guide' roles, such as choosing or drawing from a hat names which contain clues as to an appropriate role.

Another student says:

> I would prefer more likely events, such as customer/waiter conversation, in a chemist/shop, buying travel tickets maybe. I suspect what might work well is some sort of 3-minute speed-dating role-playing scenario. Or some sort of murder-mystery/cluedo game perhaps.

8. All comments were gathered in a survey with students in Open University courses in Scotland.

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