



# **Role Playing in the ESL Classroom**

Why and How to Use it  
in Your Classroom



## Benefits

- Teaches empathy
- Simulates authentic language experiences
- Provides a memorable learning experience
- Adaptable for multiple levels
- Decreases inhibitions
- Increases motivation and self-esteem
- Builds confidence

Using role playing in the classroom has many benefits:

**Empathy:** When students are participating in role play activities, they are likely to be supportive of their classmates as they understand that putting yourself out there in these types of activities makes you vulnerable. This type of supportive and understanding atmosphere increases empathy among the students.

**Authentic language experiences:** Role play activities give students practice communicating in authentic ways and situations. This will give them more confidence when presented with those scenarios when they are outside of class.

**Memorable learning experience:** The process students go through when they are doing a role play activity (creating or learning the dialogue, practicing, presenting) will help solidify the new information they are learning. Dramatic activities provide "some of the richest and most memorable experiences (students) have in their struggle with the second language" (Celce-Murcia, 71).

**Adaptable for multiple levels:** Role play activities can be modified to fit upper and lower level students within the same activity. Lower level students can stick to the previously generated script and upper level students can modify the dialogue or improvise on their own. Students can take on as much or as little spontaneity as they feel comfortable.

**Decreases inhibitions:** Parrish states that "because learners are taking on a different persona to a degree, they sometimes are less inhibited than they might be with other fluency activities" (106).

**Increases motivation and self-esteem:** Stern notes that role playing activities are "a curative for the frustration and lagging interest which can often occur during second language learning" and "provides strong instrumental motivation" for learning the language. He concludes that role playing "raises self-esteem by demonstrating to second language learners that they are indeed capable of expressing themselves in communicative situations."

**Builds confidence:** Raising students' self-esteem and showing them that they can be successful in communicative scenarios by using role-playing activities will help build their confidence when they need to communicate in real-life situations.

## What is Role Playing Good For?

- Communication Skills
- Fluency
- Grammar
- Reaching the “spontaneity state”
- Assessment Tool
- Cultural Factors


Communication skills and grammar: According to Celce-Murcia, “These techniques facilitate a match between structure and social functions and can be used for both communicative and focused grammar practice” (61).

Fluency: Practicing dialogues using realistic scenarios and role playing will help a student become more fluent with the language. Using role playing will allow them to practice words, phrases, and sentences in a realistic setting - using appropriate response time, inflection, etc.

Reaching the “spontaneity state”: Using role playing often encourages and inspires the students to access resources and language that he or she may not even know they possess. It also allows the students to take on a identity different from their own which may give them a greater sense of freedom and allow them to open up. Celce-Murcia notes: “The experience is really quite remarkable for students and teachers alike, and the fluency and accuracy exhibited are often amazing” (63).

Assessment tool: Role playing can be used as an effective assessment tool. When the students are presenting their role play, it will be easy to know if they have grasped the grammar point, content, vocabulary, or other new information presented to them. They will display what they have learned and present that knowledge to the class.

Cultural factors: Role play is a great way to teach cultural factors or etiquette. If you are trying to teach invitations, excuses, or anything that might be cultural sensitive or different, role playing will help illustrate an appropriate procedure. The students will be able to observe a model and practice for themselves. In this way, when they encounter a similar scenario on their own, they will be prepared and culturally aware of the appropriate responses. Christina Maxwell notes : “language learners can gain a deeper awareness of the target culture by means of experiences in which they role play authentic situations” (2).



## Making Role Playing Successful

- Model
- Language Support
- Have Realistic Goals
- Use Realistic Scenarios
- Use Realia and Visual Aids

**Model:** If you are having the students write their own script or dialogue, be sure to model this process with the students. If they are using an existing dialogue or script, model that dialogue with another student or classroom aid. It is important that students are comfortable with the process before attempting it for themselves.

**Language Support:** If you are having the students write their own dialogues, provide an example or words/phrases that may be helpful. Provide student friendly definitions of any new words they might want to use (or that might be in the dialogue if you provide one for them). Encourage them to use familiar words and phrases too.

**Have realistic goals:** Make sure that you assign roles that students of varying ability levels can make successful. Also assign roles that the students can be comfortable with – not something completely off the wall or strange to them.

**Use realistic scenarios:** Give them scenarios they may actually encounter in their lives outside the classroom. This will give them motivation to learn and practice and will also be the most helpful to them in the long run. If you know your students are taking the class so they can get a better job, role playing a job interview would be very beneficial to them and will help them be invested in the activity.

**Use realia and visual aids:** To make the scenario as realistic as possible, give the students props and visual aids to work with. If you are role playing a restaurant scene, give them menus, a table, etc. The less they actually have to pretend and the more realistic the role play experience, the more seriously they will take the activity.

adapted from Parrish (107)

## How to Use it in Your Classroom: Some Ideas

### Listening and Role Play

- Use a short listening passage/dialogue
- Check for comprehension
- Review grammar, language structures, pronunciation
- Students practice and personalize dialogue
- Perform

First, have the students listen to a short dialogue (45 seconds or so).

After they have listened to it a couple of times, go over the meaning of the dialogue with the students. Make sure they understand the gist of what is being said. They can complete a cloze activity for extra listening practice – then they will have a written form of the dialogue too.

Then review any grammar or language structures that may be newer to them. Also practice pronunciation of any tricky words with them as a whole class.

After they understand the dialogue – it's structure, content, and pronunciation – let the students get into small groups to practice. If they are higher level students, let them personalize or even re-write the dialogue. This will give them a bit more of a challenge. If they are lower level, let them stick to the script given. This will help them feel comfortable.

After the students have had time to practice and personalize, let them perform for the class! This will be a great way to be sure each student has a good grasp of the scenario, language structures, and pronunciation. (Maxwell, 3)

## Reading and Role Play

- Small groups
- Each group given a section of the reading
- Group discusses main events
- Group creates a dialogue to represent events
- Performs
- Feedback/questions from class

This activity is similar to a Jigsaw, but instead of regrouping and having the “expert” explain the information in the reading, the experts will perform for the rest of the class.

In their small groups, the students will read the passage they are given. They will then discuss the main points and try to summarize. As a group, they will then write a dialogue to represent the main events they have discussed. After practicing their dialogue, they will perform for the class. In this way, the class will get the information contained in the group’s reading. After they group performs, the class will have the opportunity to ask the group questions about their roles, the content, etc. The students can even be encourage to stay in character for this question/answer session.

This activity can be modified to work for lower level students, but will be most successful with a higher level (upper intermediate to advanced).

(Maxwell, 5)

## Video and Role Play

- Watch an authentic clip of a target situation
- Discuss as a class
- Give students a copy of script
- Practice
- Personalize
- Perform

Use an authentic video clip of a situation they may encounter in real life (job interview etc). Allow the students to discuss the clip afterwards – what did they see, what did they hear, would they have changed anything, etc.

After giving the students a copy of the script (this could also be a cloze activity) let them watch it again.

If they are lower level students, let them stick to the script you give them. If they are higher level students, encourage them to personalize the information or improvise.

As with the other activities, allow time for the groups to practice and then perform for the class. (Maxwell, 6)

## Long Term Project

- Groups of 5 to 10
- Students write their own script
- Edit
- Rehearse
- Perform for a wider audience

This is a long term project that will take up a good deal of time. For more advanced students, an activity like this can serve as a good assessment tool to discover what grammar structures have been truly internalized and which need more work.

Allowing the students to write their own script will help them take ownership of the project and of their work. It will also hopefully make the activity more enjoyable and rewarding. If the students are completely lost for ideas or they think of something inappropriate, then some intervention may be necessary.

The writing process (brainstorming, writing, editing, etc) will also help the students solidify their writing, collaboration, and organizational skills.

During the rehearsal process, the instructor can serve as the director and give the students advice about movement, projection, pronunciation, costumes, etc. The bulk of the creative vision will come from the students, but the instructor will be working with each group to ensure it all comes together nicely.

Having an audience larger than just their class will encourage the students to take this activity seriously, work on correct pronunciation and cultural relevance, and push themselves to do a good job. After all of their work, the final performance should also be a gratifying experience for the students! (Celce-Murcia, 63-66)

## Conclusion

- Benefits range from increasing empathy and motivation to providing authentic experiences with the language.
- Can be used to teach grammar as well as communication skills, fluency, and cultural factors.
- Will provide a memorable learning experience that the students can draw from to help navigate life outside the classroom.

## Bibliography

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