

Can Sociodramatic Play Enhance Second Language Development?

By Fernanda C. A. Batista, Ontario Tech University, Canada

Abstract

Sociodramatic play contributes to children's communication processes in several ways, including the development of language, imagination, creative expression, self-regulation, inner thought, and socialization, as well as the paving of the way for the development of symbolic activities such as literacy, mathematics, and music. To what extent, however, can it be beneficial to second language development in teenage and adult learners? In this paper, study findings about how and why sociodramatic play—also referred to as role-play, pretend play, symbolic play, and make-believe play—can help learners of all ages acquire a second language are reviewed. In these studies, sociodramatic play is regarded as an opportunity to promote interactive and cooperative learning along with understanding the norms of other cultures, providing practice for real-life experiences, and encouraging the participation of shy learners in class. Role-play boosts students' self-esteem as well as improves their communicative competence, and is, therefore, recommended to the language teacher. Replacement Performance Role-Plays are discussed in particular in this paper because they can help second language students with all levels of thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy, i.e. remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, which learners will need when communicating in the target culture.

Can sociodramatic Play Enhance Second Language Development in Teenage and Adult Learners?

Sociodramatic play contributes to children's communication processes in several ways, such as "growth in imagining, increased recall, discriminative listening and speaking, developing creative expression, learning



social language and motoric actions” (Yawkey, 1981, p. 223). Play situations create contexts for cultural learning, exploration, and socialization by eliciting the production of language, enabling children to develop emotionally and linguistically as they become members of society (Galeano, 2011; Vygotsky, 2016). In fact, Vygotsky (as cited in Elias & Berk, 2002) argues that sociodramatic play is crucial for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. The impact of sociodramatic play is so extensive that it is considered the “leading activity” in early childhood and is the location of the most psychological changes, allowing for the child’s transition to a new, higher level of development (Vygotsky, 2016; Worthington & Oers, 2017).

To what extent, however, can sociodramatic play be beneficial to second language development in teenage and adult learners as well? Research suggests that some of the benefits of sociodramatic play in second language classes include encouraging participation by reducing the affective filter and improving self-esteem in addition to increasing intrinsic motivation by providing practice for real-life experiences and promoting understanding about norms of other cultures (Littlewood, 1975; Snarski, 2007; Waring, 2013).

In this paper, the impact of sociodramatic play on second language development in learners of all ages is discussed and a particular kind of sociodramatic play, Replacement Performance Role-Play (RPRP), is explained and suggested to second language teachers as a way to develop students’ critical thinking skills in accordance with Snarski’s ideas presented in a 2007 journal article.

Sociodramatic Play and Success in Second Language Acquisition

The topic of play has received some attention in the literature of second language acquisition, with various theoretical perspectives on second language learning articulating the importance of play to development (Waring, 2013). Within the sociolinguistic perspective, play is viewed as a facilitator to second language acquisition because of its capacity to lower the affective filter, stretch learners’ sociolinguistic competence, and destabilize the interlanguage system (Waring, 2013). Within the applied linguistic standpoint, on the other hand, play is regarded as “means and end of language learning” and an element that can “broaden the range of permitted interaction patterns within the classroom”, constituting “a large portion of personally and socially significant language use” (Cook as cited in Waring, 2013, p. 2). Within a social psychological perspective, play may allow for intrinsic motivation, or, as Csikszentmihalyi describes, “flow”, i.e., “the optimal experience of individuals being fully engaged in a given task and pursuing whatever they are doing for its own sake” (Waring, 2013, p. 2). Play indeed has “highlighting features such as transforming the way we perceive reality, stretching the limits of our ordinary experience, or allowing us to ‘feel as though we are more than we actually are through fantasy, pretense, and disguise’” (Waring, 2013, p. 3).



Role-play, being one particular type of play, can work as a facilitator to second language acquisition by providing opportunity for significant language use and allowing for flow. Because of these features, it is widely used in second language classes. Littlewood (1975) claims that rationale for the use of role-play in language teaching comes from many sources, two of which are linguistic and educational. From the linguistic standpoint, the implementation of role-play can be considered a reaction against the view of language as a simply grammatical system because role-play uses language as a means of communication, treats language as a larger unit consisting of both verbal and non-verbal elements, and places language into a context of situation (Littlewood, 1975). From the educational point of view, role-play is justified because it is a technique that brings the outside world into the classroom, is important for a functional view of language, and motivates the learner by appealing to his or her game-instinct as well as “offering the opportunity for the learning to increase in relevance to his life outside the classroom” (Littlewood, 1975, p. 200).

Indeed, as Snarski (2007) points out, second language learners tend to find role-play fun and motivational because it allows them to be creative, express themselves, and interact with one another. Such interaction, from the perspective of sociocultural second language acquisition, facilitates language learning (Peterson, 2012). However, if little or no direction is given to learners, they might feel a block in their creativity and stage fright due to a lack of vocabulary or confidence. For this reason, teachers usually provide a function or scene about which students have to prepare a role-play, oftentimes using cue cards that include background information regarding the character, the scene, and the goal of the interaction (Snarski, 2007).

Replacement Performance Role-Plays (RPRP) can do more than ordinary role-plays to develop students’ critical thinking skills and pragmatic competence (Snarski, 2007). In this kind of role-play, learners view a live or videotaped scene and “comment on some aspect of the story line: the resolution of the situation, the advice offered, or a particular character’s words or actions” (Snarski, 2007, p. 3). After a discussion on the scene, students get ready to act by replacing one character and demonstrating what they would say and do under the same circumstances. Additionally, they are encouraged to observe how the outcome of the scene may change depending on the performance of the replacement role. Snarski (2007) claims that in this type of role-play, students are engaged because they have a natural impulse to respond to “what appears to be a here and now situation—a situation they observe, not one they piece together from cards or a description” (p. 3).

Other advantages of this kind of role-play include high engagement even by shy students, integrated observation tasks, applicability to various proficiency levels, pragmatic practice, and development of critical thinking skills (Snarski, 2007). First, high engagement can lead shyer students to participate and offer



their contribution, if not in front of the whole class, at least in small group settings because the need to react or respond may motivate them to leave their fears behind (Snarski, 2007). Additionally, the quality of the observation of role-plays by students is improved because the task will not only involve listening to the performance, which can be distracting due to a lack of specific objective, but also problem solving, that is, the presentation of a reaction or response to the activity (Snarski, 2007). Also, students of different proficiency levels can work together in rewriting the message of a particular character, the lower level ones being naturally exposed to language practice even if they speak less. This participation is beneficial because it builds confidence and self-esteem, which in turn lead to greater willingness to participate in class (Snarski, 2007). This type of role-play also helps students learn how to speak appropriately for the context, that is, develop pragmatic competence, which means choosing adequately between formal or informal speech, varying tone and intonation according to the meaning to be conveyed, and inserting hesitation markers in the conversation when appropriate (Snarski, 2007). Finally, when speaking, it is necessary to use critical thinking skills to combine language creatively and appropriately to respond to situations (Snarski, 2007).

RPRP can help second language students with all levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy, i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as cited in Snarski (2007), and remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating according to the revised taxonomy (Armstrong, 2016), which learners will need to have in their repertoire when communicating in the target culture. As Snarski (2007) claims, the visuals and audio of the role-play help with *knowledge* and *comprehension* (*remembering* and *understanding*). For the RPRP, "students use the application skill by working to solve a problem, to change or communicate part of the role-play in a way that suits their intended outcome" (p. 5). An *analysis* happens when "students separate out the parts from the whole or identify the different characters and see the patterns of their behavior" (p. 5) to come up with a new dialogue. A *synthesis* (*evaluation*) will happen naturally after the analysis as students will "predict what characters might do based on how they revise the dialogue. They will draw conclusions of how their new dialogue may affect a scene based on what they know about the characters of the scene up to that point" (p. 5). The *evaluation* (*creation*) step will also happen naturally because students will create new dialogues and "inevitably discern the effect the fresh dialogues have on the outcome of the role-play" (Snarski, 2007, p. 5). In an interactive activity such as this, most thinking skills need little prompting to occur, thus making it "great practice in problem solving in general and choosing appropriate, specific language that can be applied in real situations" (Snarski, 2007, p. 5).

The following RPRP, adapted from Snarski (2007, p. 16), can be used by ESL teachers in the classroom to promote the different thinking skills in students:



Scene: Two students walking toward class and talking about the upcoming exam.

Student A: Good Morning!

Student B: Morning, are you ready for the exam?

Student A: No, I didn't really have a chance to study, but I have a little help in case I need it.
(flashes a cheat sheet)

Student B: You're going to *cheat*?

Student A: Only if I have to. I didn't have time to study last night.

Scene: They walk into the classroom, and Student A takes a seat next to Student B.

Teacher: Good morning, class. As you know, there is an exam today. Please remove your books from your desks and just have your pencils ready. You will have 60 minutes for the exam. When you are finished, you may leave.

Scene: Student A visibly needs to cheat and tries looking at Student B's paper and looking at the cheat sheet, avoiding being caught by the teacher.

Student A finishes first and accidentally drops the cheat sheet. It lands near Student B. Student A leaves.

The teacher sees the cheat sheet and believes it belongs to Student B. The teacher questions Student B about the paper.

Teacher: Is this yours?

Student B: No, it isn't.

Teacher: What is it doing under your desk?

Student B: I don't know.

Teacher: OK. I will report that, and we will discuss it later.

Students should watch the scene take place, then discuss it in small groups, and finally create new lines to replace one of the characters in it and reflect upon the changes made, which would change its outcome(s).



Discussion

Sociodramatic play is important for the development of language, imagination, creative expression, self-regulation, inner thought, and socialization, as well as for the development of abstract thought and symbolic activities such as literacy, mathematics, and music in children (Elias & Berk, 2002; Galeano, 2011; Vygotsky, 2016; Worthington & Oers, 2017; Yawkey, 1981). For this reason, it is the leading activity in early childhood, being considered a zone of proximal development, that is, a place where a child advances themselves as in no other activity, and should, therefore, be provided for in early childhood education as a meaningful resource and not just as fun (Vygotsky, 2016).

However, the importance of sociodramatic play is not limited to the development of the child. In second language teaching and learning, this type of play is also relevant regardless of the student's age because it is an opportunity to promote interactive and cooperative learning as well as the understanding of norms of other cultures, provide practice for real-life experiences, and encourage the participation of shy learners in class, boosting their self-esteem and improving their communicative competence (Littlewood, 1975; Peterson, 2012; Snarski, 2007; Waring, 2013).

In particular, RPRP can help promote pragmatic competence alongside critical thinking by getting students to respond to a given situation by replacing one of the characters and sharing with the whole class or group what they would do differently if they were under the same circumstances (Snarski, 2007). This technique can be regarded as a way to promote all levels of thinking—remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating—and provide varied and challenging activities that increase students' learning and intrinsic motivation while valuing their background and previous life experience and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions in the classroom.

Acknowledgements

This research paper was written for the course Play, Language and Learning, taught by Dr. Sharon Murphy in the Faculty of Education of York University in the Fall of 2018, and the author would like to thank Dr. Murphy for the valuable feedback provided.



References

- Armstrong, P. (2016). *Bloom's Taxonomy*. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>
- Elias, C. L., & Berk, L. E. (2002). Self-regulation in young children: Is there a role for sociodramatic play? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17, 216–238. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(02\)00146-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(02)00146-1)
- Galeano, R. (2011). Scaffolding productive language skills through sociodramatic play. *American Journal of Play*, 3(3), 324–355. Retrieved from <https://www.journalofplay.org/issues/3/3/article/scaffolding-productive-language-skills-through-sociodramatic-play>
- Littlewood, W. T. (1975). Role performance and language teaching. *IRAL*, 13(3), 199–208. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1975.13.1-4.199>
- Peterson, M. (2012). Learner interaction in a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG): A sociocultural discourse analysis. *ReCALL*, 24(3), 361–380. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344012000195>
- Snarski, M. (2007). Using replacement performance role-plays in the language classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 45(4), 2–9. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1099411>
- Vygotsky, L. (2016). Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child. *International Research in Early Childhood Education*, 7(2), 3–25.
- Waring, H. Z. (2013). Doing being playful in the second language classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 34(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams047>
- Worthington, M. & Oers, B. (2017). Children's social literacies: Meaning making and the emergence of graphical signs and texts in pretence. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17(2) 147–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798415618534>
- Yawkey, T. D. (1981). Role play and language growth: strategies for imaginative experiences. *Contemporary Education*, 52(4), 223–227. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED231552>



Author Bio



Fernanda C. A. Batista has a Master's and a PhD degree in Language and Literature. She taught ESL in private language centres, basic education, and higher education as well as TESOL in a university in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil. She is currently researching English language teaching in the Canadian context and working as a Writing and ESL Specialist at Ontario Tech University.

