

A Role-Play Activity Primarily for Teaching: An Example of a Comprehensive Approach to the Learning of Japanese

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Abstract

Role-play has been used for foreign and second language education to improve learners' ability to communicate in the target language. Since the use of role-play has become so common these days as a part of the regular curriculum, it is necessary to rethink the use of it. This article reviews a history of the communicative language teaching and learning movement briefly, distinguishes the two major purposes of providing role-play between that for practice and that for evaluation, and presents an example of a role-play activity which emphasizes practice, teaching, and evaluation. This comprehensive approach to the use of role-play activities as implemented at Ball State University is described step by step in this article with theoretical justification. The use of role-play primarily for teaching has been considered one of the most enjoyable, meaningful, and effective ways to help students acquire communicative competence as well as grammatical competence in Japanese.

Keywords: Role-play, Communicative competence, Interlanguage, Authentic communication, Spiral curve

Introduction

About a half century ago Chomsky (1965) caused a revolution in the field of linguistics by his distinction between "linguistic competence" and "linguistic performance." In essence he claimed that to know the language is not the same as to be able to perform in it. Hymes (1966) presented a clarified version of the latter competence of Chomsky under the concept

of "communicative competence," which is defined as a combination of grammatical knowledge (syntax, morphology, and phonology) of the language user as well as knowledge of how the language is used appropriately in a given social context. In the foreign language teaching field Canale and Swain (1980) redefined communicative competence to include (a) grammatical competence, (b) sociolinguistic competence, and (c) strategic competence, with the addition of (d) discourse competence (1983). This list is adopted by Kida et al. (2007) in the field of Japanese teaching. Later Bachman (1990) re-categorized the four competencies into three: (a) organizational competence, (b) pragmatic competence, and (c) illocutionary competence.

The brief history of foreign language teaching above indicates that one of the major purposes of foreign language teaching in the last few decades has been to develop communicative competence under a communicative approach (Savignion, 1997), as opposed to developing grammatical competence as defined by the 1960s behaviorism (Rivers, 1968). The audio-lingual approach was developed under the latter approach with the belief that an accumulation of grammatical knowledge learned step by step with an increase in vocabulary would make the learner able to use the language eventually. This approach is known as a "grammar based approach" (Nunan, 2004).

In the 1980s Japanese language education as a foreign language emerged, particularly in North America, along with the communicative approach movement

(Makino, 1991). One of the most effective ways to develop communicative competence was to use role-play as part of classroom activities (Livingstone 1983, Ladousse 1987). Livingstone states that role-play is a classroom activity which gives learners the opportunity to practice language which can be used outside the classroom and improve communicative competence as well. The effectiveness of using role-plays in teaching was widely accepted in Japan in the 1990s (Christina, 1997).

However, recently the use of role-play in Japanese education does not seem to be discussed as much as it used to be in the 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, the annual conference of The Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ) in March, 2010, did not have a single session which discussed the use of role-play related issues (ATJ Newsletter 2010). Also surprising, *Japanese-Language Education around the Globe*, a leading journal publication in Japanese, with 19 years of history starting in 1991, had no articles with titles containing the word “role-play.” The reason for this absence could be that recent trends tend to use role-play as part of “regular” classroom activities. Hull (1992) sarcastically says that role play is “...an old and familiar technique...” (p.77). Most Japanese textbooks have role-play exercises for each lesson presented in various ways from short pattern-practices to longer task-based ones. I believe that role-play has become so common that now is the right time to re-think the purposes that it is used for. To this end, this article briefly discusses the purpose of role-playing and presents a role-play activity which is intended for the following purposes: (a) to review and practice each lesson’s grammar points, (b) to help student learning, (c) to allow students to learn the language collaboratively in class, and (d) to evaluate their language progress not only for

a particular lesson, but also for their cumulative achievement level.

Purpose of role-play

Tanaka et al. (1994) define the term role-play simply as “to practice the target language by performing the roles given to the learners” (p. 5): (Translated by the author of this article). In fact, the definition of role-play varies with purpose, and some of the more commonly stated purposes can be placed into two broad categories:

1. To “practice” for mastery of specific aspects of the target language such as grammar points, sentence patterns, vocabulary, and sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language and culture.
2. To “evaluate” the level of the learner’s proficiency such as the ACTFL OPI and the achievement of various lesson objectives presented in the textbooks or the course materials.

Role-play for the purpose of practicing the language can take many different forms such as pattern practice of specific grammar points or sentence patterns in pairs. This type of role-play generally takes the form of short speaking exercises used in many texts. Task-based role plays are intended to accomplish a given set of tasks by applying what students have just learned in a given lesson (Nunan, 2004). The last type of role-play for practice is what is called a “prompt,” which provides opportunities for students to get used to performing quickly what they have been asked to do, either on an individual basis or in pairs (Kitajima and Lyman-Hager, 1999). The latter two types of role-plays are widely used for evaluative purposes as well.

The other purpose of role-plays is to evaluate the learner’s level in the target

language. One of the most common forms of this type of evaluation is to have students memorize a sample dialogue and then have them perform it in class. The main purpose of this evaluation is to see how well the learners have memorized the material with its associated grammar knowledge in hopes that the student can apply it to actual situations. Task-oriented role-plays are another means to evaluate the students' language abilities by seeing what the learner can do with the language when given a set of tasks. This type of role-play is widely used these days given that there is a difference between what the learners know, "linguistic competence" and what they can actually accomplish with the language, "linguistic performance" (Sakoda, 2008). All of these are basically achievement evaluations. However, the most comprehensive way to evaluate the learner's proficiency instead of achievement level is the ACTFL OPI since it is a criterion-referenced assessment tool (ACTFL, 1999 and Makino, 2008).

Whether it is for practice or evaluation, a distinction needs to be made between these two purposes that role-plays are used for. The role-play described in this article is used primarily for practice with the additional purpose of evaluation. In other words, the role-play activity helps students learn the new grammar rules, sentence patterns, and vocabulary for each lesson by reviewing or re-learning what they have already studied, by a combination of "controlled learning activities" and "uncontrolled/semi-authentic activities" in class. (Kobayashi, 2001) Few aspects of the OPI's measurement techniques are used, however, since this role-play is not meant to measure the students' proficiency as its purpose.

Background and rationale of role-play for teaching

There are four important factors affecting the implementation of role-plays for teaching at Ball State University. These include (a) the textbook used for the program, (b) the speed at which each lesson is covered, (c) the number of instruction hours per week, and (d) the number of students in class. The program textbook is *NAKAMA 2* for the second-year students, and it is written based on the principles of the communicative approach. (The first-year students use *NAKAMA 1*.) Each lesson is covered in four weeks, with four hours of class instruction each week from Monday through Thursday. Four lessons are covered each semester. (Lessons 9 and 10 are taught at the beginning of the third year.) The teacher is responsible for classroom teaching, drill sessions, and testing. The average number of students for each section at this level is 20. For each lesson, the first two weeks are used for explaining all of the new grammar points and corresponding practice sections. During the third week students create the role-plays and practice them primarily outside the classroom. Kanji instruction and additional practice sessions are held in addition to the role-play related activities. During the fourth week, students present their role-plays to the class. Pairs of students create the role-plays, requiring ten pairs of students for each lesson. Three or four pairs present their role-plays each day from Monday to Wednesday, leaving the last day of the fourth week for the lesson's written exams. Each pair has approximately 10-15 minutes to present their role-play, including two separate short Q-A sessions : one in which the teacher asks questions to the audience about the contents of the role-play just presented, and one in which students ask questions to the pair who have just finished their performance. The

procedure of this role-play presentation will be described in detail later.

The rationale of implementing the role-play activity for the second-year Japanese students is based on the following four beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning:

Belief 1: Student progress in Japanese knowledge and skills should be made in the form of what is called a “spiral curve” (Martin, 1978 and Shimada, 2008) by constantly reviewing and using what they are learning as well as mastered already. Any new grammar points, sentence patterns, and vocabulary have to be learned along with the previously accumulated knowledge and skills in the target language. Needless to say, this approach is to compensate the major weakness of the grammar-based approach, based on which most texts are written. (Yamauchi, 2008) The NAKAMA series is no exception in this regard. Koyama (2008) and Shimada (2008) say that most grammar points are taught just once with an expectation that the learner will eventually master them, but that seldom happens.

Belief 2: The “interlanguage” (Selinker, 1972) exists among our students, which is a type of language between the learner’s native language and the target language, developed by using various techniques such as language transfer from L1 to L2, overgeneralization, and simplification. Similar terms were made by Nemser (1971) as “approximate system” and Corder (1981) as “transitional competence.” One of the most important roles for the teacher is to help the learners make progress constantly toward the approximation of the target language.

Belief 3: Students have to practice the language as meaningfully as possible, and to this end it is essential for our students to

practice the language as authentically as possible (Rogers and Medley, 2008).

Belief 4: Students get the most benefit from learning in an environment that is in a less stressful atmosphere (Kitano, 2001), and as a result, their learning activity will most probably result in “language acquisition” rather than “language learning”. (Krashen, 1982)

The program at Ball State University believes that role-play activities which reflect all of these four beliefs would be some of the most effective uses of role-play as a teaching tool to help our students acquire communicative competence. This type of role-play activity functions to evaluate the students’ learning for each lesson as well.

Overall steps in the role-play process

After pairs of students are formed, the role-play activity for each lesson consists of the following nine steps:

Step 1: Each pair of students makes a skit using ALL of the grammar points and sentence patterns in the lesson and utilizes any knowledge they have acquired.

Step 2: Students send a digital version of the written draft to the teacher via email.

Step 3: The teacher edits the draft and returns the revised digital version to the students.

Step 4: Students review the revised version with the teacher in class and ask questions if necessary.

Step 5: Two native speakers of Japanese (one male and one female) record the

skit and upload it to the internet for student review.

Step 6: Students listen to the online recording and practice the skit.

Step 7: Students present the role-plays in class where they are recorded on an audio recording device for later evaluation.

Step 8: After each role-play is presented, two Q-A sessions take place entirely in Japanese.

Step 9: The teacher listens to the recorded presentations and evaluates the performance of the students based on a set of criteria.

The following is a more detailed description of what is done for each step with reference to the theoretical justification:

Step 1: Each pair of students makes a skit using ALL of the grammar points and sentence patterns in the lesson and utilizes any knowledge they have acquired.

There are eight conditions for making a role-play draft in pairs:

1. The text *NAKAMA 2* has five major grammar points/sentence patterns to be learned in each session with additional grammar points related to each main point, and the draft must include at least those five major points. Grammar points include grammatical particles. Each grammar point used has to be underlined in the written draft so that the teacher can easily see it.

2. The draft has to include other types of grammar points—as many as possible. Grammar that has not been taught cannot be used.
3. The use of unfamiliar vocabulary is limited to five words, and these are listed on the draft sheet under “Unfamiliar vocabulary. (See Appendix A)
Note: This particular example in Appendix A covers the case of two lessons combined, Lessons 5 and 6.
4. Minimum length of the skit is 20 utterances, 10 for each student, but no more than 30. The length of each utterance should be short so that practice and memorization will be easier.
5. The use of Kanji is strongly encouraged for practice.
6. The setting and the contents are totally up to the pair of students.
7. The draft has to have a cover page which shows the student names, title of the skit, new vocabulary, if any, and an English translation for each utterance so that the teacher can make corrections more easily as needed. (See Appendix A)
8. Drafts are initially started in class on Monday of the third week, and are completed by Thursday of the same week.

According to Krashen (1982), second language learners make progress only by dealing with language from one level above their present level, what Krashen calls the Input Hypothesis, “i plus 1”. The basic principle of the activity for our students is similar to this hypothesis particularly in the

sense that not all the students in the class have the same level of knowledge and skills in the target language. Each pair makes a skit based on their level of proficiency with an inclusion of the required grammar and sentence patterns. This is one of the reasons why it is more effective to have the students memorize a skit, which is appropriate level for each student instead of just one skit for all students.

Step 2: Students send a digital version of the written draft to the teacher via email.

The draft has to be received by the teacher by Thursday of the third week. A late submission receives a penalty. One of each pair sends the draft to the teacher and a copy to the other member of the pair. In this way, the teacher has both students email address. One of the advantages of this method is that a student can submit the draft anytime from anywhere without making a hard copy. Needless to say, if a draft does not meet any of the requirements indicated in Step 1, it is returned to the sender without any corrections. The pair has to fix the problem and resend it by the deadline.

Step 3: The teacher edits the draft and returns the revised digital version to the students.

There are four important areas to be checked carefully by the teacher for corrections of the draft. They are proper use of (a) the grammar points/sentence patterns of the lesson as well as previous lessons, (b) vocabulary, (c) sociolinguistic forms, and (d) Kanji. Grammar related corrections are indicated in red letters (for this article it is in *Italics*); vocabulary and sociolinguistic corrections are in blue (for this article it is in *Italics*); and any additions to the draft mostly because of sociolinguistic inappropriateness

are in green letters (for this article it is in *Italics*). As shown in this article the original forms, which were corrected, are in parentheses. (See Appendix A)

There are two kinds of corrections to be made: one for errors, which are made from the student's incorrect learning or misunderstanding, and the other is mistakes, which are caused by the student's carelessness. By noticing the corrected errors, the students realize their incorrect understanding, (i.e. "Noting" Koyama, 2008) and by noticing the mistakes, they become aware of their carelessness, ("Uptake" Koyama, 2008). Whether it is the former or the latter, the corrections by the teacher help further the students learning and serve to change the students' "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) toward an approximation of the target language.

Step 4: Students review the revised version with the teacher in class and ask questions if necessary.

No matter how obvious the corrections the teacher makes might be, students may not recognize that they made mistakes. For this reason this a short correction review session in class is essential. A face to face explanation works very well. If there are any major language or socio-cultural problems found in many students' skits, the teacher provides a short clarification session for them. Interestingly, in most cases clarification of the teacher's corrections have to do with vocabulary rather than grammar points. However, the most appreciated correction is having students rewrite an awkward-sounding Japanese sentence into a more natural Japanese sentence while keeping the intended meaning and adding or deleting utterances because of the differing sociolinguistic norms between English and Japanese and "interlanguage." This type of correction

requires an explanation for students to understand. The review session is another very important “teaching” activity for the program.

Step 5: Two native speakers of Japanese (one male and one female) record the skit and upload it to the Internet.

Two students from Japan record the skits digitally and put them on the Internet. Using the native speakers allows students to listen to a reading of the skits that very much resembles how Japanese people normally speak. Since teachers sometime tend to speak like commercially available audio materials, it is very helpful for the learners to get used to hearing other speakers of Japanese speaking as naturally as possible from the written scripts. The recording and uploading take place on Friday afternoon of the third week so that students can listen to and practice the skits until the following Monday when presentations start in the fourth week.

Step 6: Students listen to the online recording and practice the skit.

Before presenting the role-play to the class, each pair practices their skit either together or individually until they have memorized both roles (the first speaker and the second speaker) without the written scripts. To help with proper pronunciation, intonation, accent, and other linguistic related aspects of the language, the students refer to the model of the skit on the Internet. Regardless of gender, hearing the model spoken by a male and a female is helpful to distinguish the two roles in the skit. In addition to the obvious benefits above, the model on the Internet has another advantage in that students can access it almost anywhere because it is on the Internet.

From the point of foreign/second language learning, this practice is a similar attempt to change the controlled process into automatic process (Kobayashi, 2001). Arguments are raised, also, that repeating what the learner has just heard is very effective, a learning process called “shadowing.” (Koyanagi and Sakoda, 2006). Again, because the skits are what the students themselves have written, practicing them is more realistic and fun with the Internet, and students seem to easily remember the skits and retain their contents for a long time, according to comments that I receive from them. If that is the case, this technique is a very effective way to help the students in their acquisition of the language for communication. Also it is hoped that what the students listen to will become “intake” and eventually result in “output” (i.e. Input processing instruction as described by VanPatten and Candierno, 1993).

It should be noted that although a video version of the model demonstration would be better, particularly for learning the non-verbal aspects of the performance, a video has not been used due to a lack of facilities, equipment, and staff for its production and uploading to the Internet.

Step 7: Students present the role-plays in class where they are recorded on an audio recording device for evaluation.

There are five steps for each pair’s presentation:

1. The teacher assigns the roles to the first speaker or the second. On the script sheet in Appendix A, they are indicated as “A” and “B”, respectively.

2. Three minutes is given in class before the presentation for their practice.
3. Just before presentation of the role-play, the teacher tells the remaining students (a) the title, (b) the setting, (c) roles for each pair, and (d) a brief summary of the skit, and explains the list of unfamiliar vocabulary if it is listed on the script sheet.
4. Before the role-play presentation begins, the teacher starts an audio recorder, which is placed near the pair. This recording is for evaluative purposes in Step 9 below.
5. During each pair's presentation, the remaining students watch and take notes. The notes will be used for the discussion in Step 8 that follows.

One of the most important considerations for having a role-play session in class is to provide a non-threatening atmosphere and to make the performers feel confident. The procedure for Step 7 definitely meets these two conditions. Wakuwaku Role-Play (Japan Foundation, 2003) supports the creation and performance of this type of role-play in the following way:

“Through role-plays and skits students of various levels can learn cooperatively in an enjoyable, non-threatening environment, and can showcase their learning to a wide audience.” (p.1)

Step 8: After each role-play is presented, two Q-A sessions take place entirely in Japanese.

During the first Q-A session the teacher asks questions in Japanese to the rest of the students regarding the contents of the skit

such as “Why was Mr. Tanaka late for the meeting?” In order for the students to answer the questions, they need to have listened to the role-play very carefully and have taken notes if necessary. Even though answering the questions is voluntary, the teacher often calls on students for answers. By conducting the session this way, the teacher makes sure all students actively participate in the session. This is semi-controlled communication between the teacher and the rest of the students, but it works very effectively from the point of having meaningful communication in the target language.

For the second Q-A session students ask questions in Japanese regarding the contents of the role-play to the pair who performed the skit. The purpose is so that students have a chance to ask questions instead of just answering them. This is also semi-controlled communication, but takes place between the pair of students who have just performed and the rest of the class. Additionally, students can ask any question as long as it is related to the topic of the role-play. For instance, if the subject of the role-play is business meetings, students can talk or discuss anything about business meetings relating to the role-play. Depending on how the discussion progresses, the teacher can get involved in it, too. During these sessions the focus is completely on meaning rather than form (i.e. Focus on Meaning vs. Focus on Form (Doughty and Williams 1998), and this focus naturally make this session enjoyable, meaningful, and vigorous. Hull (1992) strongly recommends this type of interaction among the learners:

For instance, learners could be encouraged to listen to each other and ask their own follow-up questions; in other words, they could use the cues as a springboard to freer and more extended collaborative interaction. (p. 85)

The most important aspect of this session is the way discussion is held in the target language. It is considered one of the highest forms of “authentic communication” in terms of “function” rather than “task” by using the information of the role-play contents as the topic to talk about. Since the topic and the contents are all initiated by the students, it is not only interesting but also enjoyable in a less stressful or less threatening atmosphere. In fact, many students in the class think the Q-A sessions at this step is the most enjoyable part of the entire role-play activity. Research by Tyers (2002) supports the positive psychological effects of this type of role-play as giving learners great happiness, enjoyment, and satisfaction even though the role-play performance itself is rather stressful.

Participation by the rest of the students in these two sessions is evaluated on the basis of a few criteria such as enthusiasm and correctness in asking and answering questions.

Step 9: The teacher listens to the recorded presentations and evaluates the performance of the students based on a set of criteria.

After the role-play presentation session is over, the teacher evaluates the performance of the students by listening to the recorded performances outside of class. Although students work in pairs, each student is evaluated individually and given an individual score. The established criteria for the evaluations are (a) fluency, (b) grammatical accuracy, (c) pronunciation, and (d) non-verbal expressions. (See Appendix B for a sample evaluation sheet for Lessons 5 and 6 combined.) The evaluation takes place after the role-play presentations rather than during the performances to avoid unnecessary pressure and stress on the performing students. For

this reason, no evaluation should be made any time during the role-play session. As the teacher listens to the recorded performance while following the skit script, he/she marks mistakes and errors on the script sheet in red pen so that the students can recognize them easily. The teacher also writes comments for each student on their evaluation sheet. All of these evaluation points and comments are of great help to further the students’ studies of the language. The importance and effectiveness of such a feedback is suggested by Rivers (1989).

Conclusion

The role-play activity outlined in this article may not be applicable to other programs due to the difference in various circumstances and conditions of each program. But it is possible for any program to adapt and implement some of the steps used for this role-play in any program.

The role-play activity is simply one of the effective ways to learn the target language well and to develop communicative competence in Japanese as a part of the regular curriculum. The evidence of its effectiveness has been obtained through the students’ course evaluations over the past several years. For instance, the following three remarks have been made by many students:

“The role-play session was the best part of this course, and I enjoyed it very much.”

“The role-play session made me feel I CAN communicate in Japanese indeed.”

“For some reason, I still remember the role-play skit very well and the grammar I used comes more quickly and naturally.”

Experimental research ideally needs to be conducted on this type of role-play for it to be considered as effective as the teacher

and the students believe; however, designing such a research study would be difficult.

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Appendices

Appendix A (Role-play Draft) Cover Sheet & Draft Sheet

Cover Sheet

ロールプレイ ドラフト

名前: ジェードとマリ

Lessons: 5課と6課

Title: ケーキ作り

新しい単語

Butter: バター

Eggs: たまご

Flour: こむぎこ小麦粉

Sugar: さとう砂糖

Salt: しお塩

Add: たす

To mix: ま混ぜる

To trip: つまづく

To tear (paper): やぶ破る

Draft Sheet

A: 今日は!

Hello!

B: 今日は!

Hello!

A: バターとたまごを持って来ました。

I brought the eggs and butter.

B: 有難うございます。もうこむぎこやさとう
をたしておきました。(たせておきます)

Thank you. I have already added the flour and
sugar.

A: いいですね。もうベーキングパウダーを た
し(たせ)ましたか。

That's good. Have you added the baking powder
in yet?

B: いいえ、まだたしてありません(たせませ
ん)。しおをたしてから出来ます。

No, I haven't yet. After adding the salt, I can.

A: そうですね。あの、たまごが大丈夫かどう
か分かりません。

That's good. Um, I don't know whether the eggs
are good or not.

B: ええ? どうしてですか。(どうしますか)

Eh? Why?

A: 車を降りた時に、アイスにつまずきました。

While I was getting out of my car, I tripped because of the ice.

A: あ！—B—さんは大丈夫ですか。

Ah! Are you ok?

B: ええ、私は大丈夫ですよ。でも、たまごは。。Yeah, I'm ok. But, the eggs...

B: たまごを見つてもいいですか。

May I see the eggs?

A: どうぞ。

Please do.

B: あ、大丈夫ですよ。二つつしかよくないです。Ah, they're ok. Only two are bad.

A: じゃ、^{じゅっこ}十個(十つ、)だけ Addition いいのがありますね。

Well, we have as many as ten, don't we?

B: あの、チョコレートを持って来ましたか。

Uh, did you bring the chocolate?

A: あ！忘れました！

Ah! I forgot!

B: —A—さんのリストに書きませんでしたか。

Didn't you write it on your list?

A: 書いたはずですが、誰かが このリストをやぶりましたねえ Addition(やぶってありますね)。。。It should be written, but it looks like someone has torn my list...

A&B: コーディちゃん！
Cody!

B: 残念ですね。あの、それでは家に帰って、チョコレートを持って来てくれませんか。(持って帰れますか)

That's too bad. Uh, can you return and get it?

A: 時間がありますか。

Do we have time?

B: 十五分でチョコレートをたせます。

In 15 minutes, I can add the chocolate.

A: それなら 大丈夫ですよ(それはいいですよ)。公園を運転して、十五分で帰れます。じゃ、行って来ます。

That's good. I'll drive through the park and be back in 15 minutes. OK, I'll go and be back!

B: はい、じゃまた^{あと}後で。(さようなら)
Bye.

Appendix B (Evaluation sheet) Role-play Evaluation Sheet

Name: _____

Chapters: 5 & 6

Score: _____/10

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Fluency	1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points
Grammar	1 point for more than 5 mistakes	1.5 points for 5 mistakes	2 points for 4 mistakes	2.5 points for 3 mistakes	3 points for fewer than 3 mistakes
Pronunciation	1 point	1.25 points	1.5 points	1.75 points	2 points
Non-verbal use	-----	-----	0.5 point extra	-----	1 point extra

Comments: