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Role-Play: A Low-intermediate Interactive Speaking/Writing Task for ESL Learners

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As an English language teacher, I believe learners need to engage with the language in meaningful ways to develop their second language (L2) knowledge. As a result, when possible, I develop tasks that will push learners to use and hear authentic language. In this piece, I will share an idea for developing a role-play task that pushes learners to interact, with a purpose. Before providing the details of the task, I will present the theoretical framework that informs this task.

INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS

The role-play task, informed by principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), adheres to the theoretical framework of the Interaction Hypothesis. According to Gass and Mackey (2006), input, interaction, feedback, and output are important elements. Specifically, for L2 learning to occur, learners need exposure to oral/written input and need opportunities to produce language. Through these interactions, learners receive implicit or explicit feedback about their language production from their teachers and/or peers. During interaction, learners can engage in metalinguistic conversations where learners question their output and engage in self-correction. As a result of the feedback, learners may produce modified output (Gass & Mackey, 2006).

According to Swain (2005), L2 fluency is also enhanced through the noticing/triggering function that an L2 learner experiences when practicing the target language. When trying to produce language, learners may realize they might not know how to express themselves in a target-like manner. This allows them to notice gaps in their output and to engage in cognitive processes to develop hypotheses of a target linguistic structure (Gass & Mackey, 2006).

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

TBLT methodology emphasizes pairing/group work and the use of authentic materials (Nunan 2004). TBLT lessons typically include a pre-task, task, and post-task cycle. For this interactive role-play task, students are assigned to a partner. I will now walk you through the pre-task, task, and post-task.

Pre-task: Modeling

The objectives for the pre-task is to prepare students for a role play. During the pre-task, learners are presented with a model of asking and giving advice such that the teacher and one learner model the task of asking/giving advice (see main task for the details). Overall, modeling is a good way to increase learner confidence during task performance and reduces anxiety. Also, according to Kim and McDonough (2011), modeling could also encourage discussion about language forms.

Main Task

The learning objective of the task is for students to ask for advice and/or give advice in different contexts. To set up the task, you can set up different stations throughout the classroom that display a situational notecard, namely, library, grocery store, or school. This provides opportunities for learners to practice asking/giving advice in a variety of authentic situations. Students are allowed seven minutes at each station. After a few minutes of task performance, students are reminded to use different phrases when asking/giving advice and are continually monitored to make sure they complete the writing portion of the activity.

The role-play materials

Students will receive a notecard that has a picture of an individual, an emotion listed (e.g. guilty), and a situation (e.g. I copied my friend's homework and feel guilty). Student A will use this information and create a sentence (e.g., I copied my homework and feel guilty). In addition, they should ask for advice (e.g., What should I do?). Student B would then provide concrete advice. It should be noted that the notecards will have a number (e.g. 2 or 3). This means the learner will give either two or three pieces of advice. This pushes the students to produce more output. Students giving and receiving advice should write down the advice. After each learner has had the opportunity to switch roles with the notecard, they repeat the activity again with a different situational card (i.e., a new station). It is easy for learners to forget about the writing and just talk about their situational card.

It is important to give learners the chance to move around during the task; kinesthetic learners appreciate this and it gives the lesson more variety. Negotiation of meaning can occur through learner interaction during the task. Learners placed in pre-assigned partners might give each other feedback through confirmation checks, clarification requests, and comprehension checks. While students are working, this is a good opportunity for the teacher to walk around the classroom and provide corrective feedback during group observation. This feedback can push learners to produce modified output. Allowing learners opportunities to share advice with classmates can be a fun and engaging part of the task. It can even lead to learners agreeing/disagreeing with one another.

Post-task

In the post-task, students will complete a crossword puzzle. The crossword's clues will be definitions of terms used during the task. This post-task helps solidify new information. Also, this post-task may bring out the competitiveness of learners to see who finishes first. It is a fun way to end a lesson. The crossword puzzle can be accessed through TheTeachersCorner.net under Crossword Maker.

CONCLUSION

While the lesson laid out here is intended for low-intermediate learners, teachers can make adjustments to this lesson for various proficiency levels. Words such as “embarrassment”, “hesitant,” and “overwhelmed” would be replaced with more simplistic vocabulary like “sad”, “happy”, and “angry”. Or, during the post-task portion of the activity, learners could work on the crossword puzzle together. This could create more opportunities for negotiation of meaning. If my lesson were implemented in a classroom with learners of higher proficiency, there would be a greater emphasis on writing down advice in complete sentences with attention to forms. Students would be required to turn in the advice they wrote down for assessment. This might cause them to have a greater focus on the writing portion of the activity. Also, instead of having one sentence on the notecard, there would be two for greater complexity. (e.g.: “I feel hopeless because my homework is completely incomprehensible. The written instructions do not make sense.”) A way to change the grouping strategy of this activity is to place higher proficiency learners with lower level learners. Lastly, if a small classroom makes it difficult for students to move around from station to station, groups of two can have a stack of situational notecards they work with at their desk. In summary, this lesson provides real-world, meaningful authentic materials. The TBLT approach promotes communicative opportunities for students to engage in LREs, which employs students in deeper cognitive processes. The lesson is fun and interactive and is easily manipulated to meet the needs of different learners.

REFERENCES

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