USE OF ROLE PLAYS AND CASE STUDIES IN THE COURSE OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract

The course of Business English aims at helping future specialists to use English in their habitual professional life. Nowadays teachers use a wider range of techniques in the process of study. Thus, educational games become more popular as they teach students to set goals and rules, adapt to new situations and people, solve problems and interact with each other. They help to use acquired professional skills in the conditions of a possible professional situation. It is an active method of teaching, which creates a problem and organizes problem-solving, which involves all the students who learn to formulate and express their reasons and work out common decision. This paper deals with role plays and case studies as they have their own peculiarities, aims, role in the process of study and methods of conducting them.

Keywords: educational games, interactive teaching methods, profession-oriented study, role plays, case studies.

1 METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE USE OF EDUCATIONAL GAMES AS AN INTERACTIVE METHOD OF STUDYING

The basic trend of contemporary science is to find the ways of socially grounded understanding of the environment. There is a correlation between the cognitive concepts of a person and the social environment he/she belongs to. That is why the role of profession-oriented study is not only to impart knowledge, to form professional skills but to socialize a person as well. It means that students as future specialists must learn to be independent and responsible, to make decisions and bear responsibility for their actions.

This objective can be achieved with the use of interactive methods, which encourage interest in the profession, promote the efficient acquisition of the material, form patterns of conduct, provide high motivation, team spirit and freedom of expression and contribute to the complex competences of future specialists. Interactive learning for students is a real-world approach to education. According to Stanford University School of Medicine, “Interactive learning actively engages the students in wrestling with the material. It reinvigorates the classroom for both students and faculty. Lectures are changed into discussions, and students and teachers become partners in the journey of knowledge acquisition”. The forms, methods and ways of such critical-thinking and problem-solving teaching are called interactive.

Interaction is a research area in psychology and social studies which regards personal development from the perspective of social interaction. Interaction studies are based on the ideas of Charles Cooley, James Baldwin, William Thomas, Georg Simmel. Interaction is a transaction that depends on idiosyncrasies of the participants, social situation, behavioral patterns, objectives of the participants and possible disagreements that can arise in the process of communication.

Interactive teaching is a form of organization of cognitive and communicative activity when students are not only involved in the cognitive process, they respond to it according to their knowledge and experience. Students' cooperation presupposes personal contribution of participants, an exchange of knowledge, ideas, values in the environment of amiability and mutual support. They solve tasks which are common for all but at the same time meaningful for every participant.

Interactive teaching helps to cope with several tasks. They are:

- to develop students’ communicative skills and build rapport with other members of the group;
- to solve some information task;
- to develop personal skills of making analysis, synthesis, of setting goals and other job-related skills;
to teach students to work in a team and listen to other opinions.

Interactive teaching is based on the following principles:

1. the principle of involvement. Students are involved in the process of solving specially developed tasks that presuppose active participation of all of them;
2. the principle of investigative and creative attitude. Teammates work out their own ways of solving some problem developing their personal and creative skills;
3. the principle of behavioral awareness. An important component of an effective work in a team is some feedback which helps to create favourable conditions for cooperative work;
4. the principle of partnership. The decisions are taken with the regard of other teammates’ interests, ideas and feelings. [1]

2 ROLE PLAYS AND CASE STUDIES: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

The advantages of Business games are unquestionable. They answer the professional needs of students, students are safe from any risks in case they make some wrong business decisions, the games prepare players for an interaction in the professional sphere and remove all psychological barriers. Why do teachers so often fail to reach the desired effect?

All educationalists agree that business role plays and case studies help future specialists to apply their theoretical knowledge for the solution of real problems that some companies had. Some opponents will say that it is a sort of entertainment and distraction at the lesson which allow students to enjoy themselves without any obvious result.

Is it really so? Let us regard the goals that we achieve when we resort to educational games including role plays and case studies:

1. they are a great opportunity to master the profession-related vocabulary and grammar that constitute an integral part of any unit in the Student’s Book. It is done not in the form of drilling while doing some exercises with far-fetched examples and sentences. Vocabulary and grammar material are trained in a true-to-life situation, and though some patterns may be prescribed, individual reaction and language variations are welcome;
2. educational games can get the students interested in the subject, boost their motivation in subject learning;
3. educational games can be used at any level of study;
4. they are a powerful tool to test the language material at the final lesson on the topic;
5. they give you the possibility to better illustrate theoretical business concepts;
6. educational games increase student engagement and enjoyment; they improve student knowledge retention, decision making and teamwork skills;
7. they help in making the school curriculum more versatile and variable;
8. educational games don’t only improve student-student interaction, they also improve student-teacher interaction as teacher’s role is changed form mentor to facilitator.

If educational games make a real benefit for teachers, why many of them try not to use such games at their lessons? We will try to make a list of so-called disadvantages and give the reasons why such problems come out.

1. Some teachers and parents would consider games a waste of time and not educational. When educational games turn out to be only fun and don’t have any educational purpose, it means the teacher didn’t manage to prepare them properly, or overlooked some important steps or nuances at one of the game stages.
2. Not all students can be comfortable with educational games, they can be anxious about being inferior in their knowledge of the foreign language or a lack of knowledge about some situation. This can impede an individual’s confidence, affect their performance and undermine their contributions in teamwork. Such situations occur when the teacher wasn’t quite sensitive while forming groups, because teachers should be aware of their students’ relationships, and put shy and unconfident students in one group with their friends.
3 The game may not be taken seriously, someone may be unwilling or unable to get into the required mood needed to actually replicate a situation, and the whole procedure may be turned into pure entertainment. In this case the teacher might have made a mistake at the preparation stage or chosen an unsuitable role for the person.

4 When choosing a game it is not often clear how the results of the game will be assessed. The teacher will need to find a way to translate the students’ progress into scores.

5 Many times, setting up a game for the course requires a lot of prior planning and logistics. That’s why the teacher must be ready to spend a lot of time and think everything over to avoid any failures.

In conclusion it is necessary to mention that before designing the game-based curriculum it is important to check out organizational support structures, availability of hardware and software and other resources and to predict all obstacles.

3 ROLE PLAYS AND CASE STUDIES: HOW TO PREPARE AND CONDUCT

There are different kinds and different types of interactive means of teaching; we will focus on two rather popular ones: role plays and case studies. It is necessary to distinguish role plays and case studies as they have their own peculiarities, aims, role in the process of study and methods of conducting them.

3.1 Role plays

Role games aim at mastering professional skills of business communication. The students are given roles and instructions on a set of activities to reach the goal. But even with role plays’ seeming simplicity, teachers should remember the following: 1) a role game must be well-prepared; 2) all the steps of the game (preparation, consideration and analysis) must be conducted in the English language; 3) to participate in the game students must have a command of certain grammar structures, communication patterns and vocabulary; 4) the topic of the role game must be interesting for students.

Each step of a role play is fraught with a number of problematic points which must be taken into consideration. If the role play is well-organized, every student is 100% participating in it, even if he/she is just listening, he/she needs this information, he/she is interested and that is already a reaction.

There are some issues which a teacher should consider and which play a pivotal role in organizing a successful game:

- students must be accustomed to work in pairs and groups;
- the game must be chosen in accordance with the level of English of the group;
- the game must answer students’ interests and peculiarities of the group;
- the students must have factual information, either handed out by their teacher or taken from the Internet;
- as the aim of the role game is to use particular grammar patterns and vocabulary in certain situations, the students must be aware of that and control the performance of the task;
- during the educational process students accumulate conversation fillers, phrases of agreement/disagreement and other useful phrases that are often used in conversations;
- the facts and situation are discussed in detail;
- the roles are distributed according to the interests and capabilities of the students, the teacher makes sure that the students have no questions on what they are supposed to do;
- the groups must be equal from the point of view of the participants' level of English and temper;
- students have some time to get familiar with their role and the language they are going to use, but they shouldn’t “train” it beforehand, they should speak spontaneously, they are supposed to react on the spot.

We can single out three basic steps of role plays:

1 *Preparation*. It is a very important step that defines the success of the whole game. As in role games students assume the role of characters in a fictional setting, at this stage the teacher
sets goals for the game, thinks of the situation, its participants, gives their characteristics, intentions and mode of behaviour, describes their actions. At the same time the points to be discussed and useful language are considered. For example, for the topic Negotiations the teacher works out a situation with two companies trading some goods, their location, type of business, intentions for cooperation, final goals and ways of achieving them; the conditions to be discussed (delivery time, place of delivery, price, payment terms, returns etc.) and useful language to be used during negotiations (starting and exploring positions, making offers and concessions, refusing an offer, accepting an offer, playing for time, closing the deal).

2 **Role game-playing**. The students have some time to get familiar with their roles, the situation, their mode of behaviour, what they are supposed to achieve, clarify the issues which are not clear, and begin to play the game. During the game the teacher assumes the role of an observer or a coordinator (if necessary); if the game doesn't go or if it's necessary, the teacher can take one of the roles, but he/she should remember that this is a role of an equal participant and shouldn't hog the blanket and lead in the game.

3 **Analysis**. We think that there are three aspects that should be analyzed. First, as this is an educational game, the teacher should correct the mistakes that were made during the game, especially those that could become a stumbling block for understanding each other in the process of communication. Second, the students should analyze if the game was successful, if they managed to achieve the goals, what went wrong or caused difficulties and how it could be solved, what they could offer to improve the game. Third, it would be helpful for a teacher to learn everyone's assessment of their role in the game as that of a participant and a member of a group, which can be done with the help of an evaluation form.

### 3.2 Case studies

Though case studies include the same steps, they analyze a real situation that a certain company faced. As opposed to role plays, case studies presuppose the solution of a global task within a scope of a certain business. The focus is shifted from language skill training to the analysis of the situation itself taking into account historical and temporal factors. Students are given more freedom, case studies center around working out the alternatives for solving the problem and the choice of the most appropriate one. The most stimulating factor is the realness of the situation that gives students the possibility to put themselves in the place of the company staff and compare their decision with the one taken by the management of the company.

The methodological principles of a case study are flexibility in research approaches, case as a social issue, a detailed and multi-faceted research of social aspects and collaborative work as a guarantee of the validity of research. A case study pursues two goals: understanding of an issue under study, interaction and understanding in the group; and getting new knowledge about global social aspects.

[2]

Any case includes:

1. situation (some problem or issue that a real company came across);
2. situation context (historical, chronological, staff behaviour);
3. comments on the situation;
4. tasks for the case;
5. relevant appendices.

Any case must answer a set of requirements:

1. it must be taken from real life;
2. it must be formulated in accordance with the accumulated experience and possible situations the students can get into in their professional life;
3. it must give the possibility for interpretation by the members of the group;
4. it must contain problematic issues and conflicts;
5. it must be solvable from the point of view of time constraint and capabilities of students;
6. it must presuppose different ways of problem-solving. [3]

As we mentioned above, both role plays and case studies include the same steps:
1 **Preparation.** As the method of case studies is very popular among teachers and staff trainers, there is a wide range of cases available for the public on the Internet, that is why teachers can study them, choose the most appropriate ones, even make their own one (which, of course, will take some time and effort) and compile their own portfolio of cases. The teacher must just remember that any case should answer the topic they study, practical needs and capabilities of students.

2 **Case-solving.** The cases can be divided into simple cases (mini-cases) and complex cases, that is why they can take from one to six hours of classroom study. As a rule cases are presented in the following way: they begin with some background, that is the information about the company, its products and other business issues. Students are involved in data-gathering, they either read articles about the company prepared by the teacher, or they look for and share detailed information from press articles and research reports. At this step students can work by themselves, in pairs and in groups. When the roles are distributed and information is perceived, students come to the point of decision-making, which can be done either in the form of negotiating, business meeting, interviewing and so on. This step ends up with follow-up activities like business writing, when students practice communicating their business decisions and ideas in letters and business proposals. Many Business courses (e.g. Market Leader, Intelligent Business) as a follow-up activity offer to watch or listen to the case study commentary to learn what decision the management or staff really took. [4]

3 **Analysis.** Unlike role plays, case study analysis focuses not on the mistakes that were made, vocabulary and grammar structures that were used, but on the achievement of some success in a certain situation and justification of taken decisions. Students can evaluate the result of their work and personal participation and contribution to the case solution. It can be done both in the form of a group discussion and personal interview.

Here we introduce a possible self-evaluation form that can help the teacher to investigate students’ impressions of the game, of their group and personal achievements and failures. This form can be used after role-gaming or case-solving.

**PARTICIPANT SELF-EVALUATION FORM**

After you participate in a Role Play/Case Study, answer the following questions by putting a tick [$v$] in the appropriate spaces.

1. When you spoke, how often did you use English?
   
   ______ A. All the time.
   ______ B. Most of the time.
   ______ C. Some of the time.
   ______ D. None of the time.

2. How many times did you have a chance to speak during the Role Play/Case Study?

   ______ A. Five or more times.
   ______ B. Three or four times.
   ______ C. One or two times.
   ______ D. None of the times.

3. Did you have any problems during the Role Play/Case Study?

   ______ A. I didn’t understand the topic.
   ______ B. I didn’t know enough about the topic to contribute ideas.
   ______ C. I couldn’t think of anything to say.
   ______ D. I had problems with vocabulary. I didn’t know the right words in English to say what I wanted.
   ______ E. I had problems with grammar.
   ______ F. I had some problems with my pronunciation.
   ______ G. I haven’t had enough practice in speaking English and I just couldn’t get the words out.
   ______ H. It was difficult to use the expressions for this Role Play/Case Study.
   ______ I. Other speakers interrupted me.
   ______ J. Other speakers didn’t give me the chance to talk.
   ______ K. I felt nervous or shy.
   ______ L. Nobody paid attention to what I said.
M. I couldn’t understand the other speakers.
N. I think I talked too much.
0. Other problems. Which ones?
4. How can you solve the problems that you ticked?

5. Overall, how do you think your group did? Use the following scale to rate the discussion. In general, how was it?
   Excellent 3
   Satisfactory 2
   Weak 1
   Unsatisfactory 0

6. How do you think you can improve the next discussion?

4 ROLE OF GAMES IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

Role games and case studies help to use acquired professional skills in the conditions of a possible professional situation. It is an active method of teaching, which creates a problem and organizes problem-solving, which involves all the students who learn to formulate and express their reasons and work out common decision.

The need for meaningfulness in language learning has been accepted for some years. If the students are amused, angered, intrigued or surprised the content is clearly meaningful to them. Thus the meaning of the language they listen to, read, speak and write will be more vividly experienced and, therefore, better remembered. If it is accepted that games can provide intense and meaningful practice of language, then they must take the central part to a teacher’s repertoire.

REFERENCES