

# Doing role-play successfully in Japanese language classrooms

## Keywords

roleplay, EFL, open-ended activities, Japanese EFL classrooms

Roleplay is a traditional EFL technique included in many books on EFL methodology as well as mass-market English textbooks. However, roleplay can be a challenge in Japanese EFL classrooms, and teachers are often wary of the uncomfortable silence that can result when trying this relatively open-ended activity with students accustomed to teacher-fronted classes and tightly controlled language-practice activities focused on form. In fact, roleplay can be a great tool for language learning and considerable fun for students and the teacher alike if set up and monitored carefully with attention to a few key points. When done successfully, roleplays can also transform the atmosphere of the classroom as students manage the risk and unpredictability of freer language use.

ロールプレイは市販の教科書で使われているだけでなくEFL方法論テキストにも明記されている従来からあるテクニックである。しかしながら、教師主導型の授業や厳しく制限された言語形態重視の練習に慣れている学生相手に、この比較的無制限の言語活動を行うと不快な沈黙を伴うことが多く、日本の授業で行うには課題の多いテクニックである。だが実際、いくつかのカギとなる点を考慮に入れて注意深く組み立て調整すれば、学生にとっても教師にとっても言語学習の効果的、かつ楽しみを与えてくれる手段でもある。ロールプレイがうまく作動すると、学生は自由な言語活動が持つ危険性と予測不能性にうまく対処し、クラスの雰囲気は大きく変わるのである。

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The idea of doing a roleplay can elicit excitement as well as fear in the hearts of students and teachers alike. Why? Because unlike more controlled language-learning activities, roleplays can either be a lot of fun or fail miserably. Yes, there are risks in doing roleplays, but the benefits are potentially great as well. Roleplay is a traditional language learning activity common to EFL/ESL methodology texts and mass-market English textbooks. However, my early attempts at doing roleplay with Japanese students resulted quickly in either an uncomfortable silence or fairly marginal communicative exchanges. Discussion with other teachers found that many had had similar experiences, and avoided doing roleplays assuming that they were not appropriate for Japanese students or just not worth the trouble.

Six years ago I was asked to teach a university English class dedicated to roleplay, and as there were no appropriate textbooks available for such a class, I gradually developed materials and an approach to doing roleplay in Japanese classrooms that worked well. This effort resulted in a speaking textbook focused on roleplay entitled *Moving on with English* (Bray, 2007), which was reviewed by Margaret Wells in *The Language Teacher* in December, 2008. My experiences have convinced me that roleplay can not only provide excellent language practice, but can also transform the atmosphere of a classroom because it encourages students to step out of themselves to take on roles and respond appropriately to others in the present moment. When done successfully, the risk of failure inherent in an unstructured communicative situation like a roleplay can be experienced as a sense of immediacy and excitement. There are some key points when doing roleplays that can make the difference between success and failure in Japanese classrooms.

However, before exploring these points, I want to review what roleplay is and the factors that can make it challenging.

### **Roleplay: What it is and why it can be difficult**

According to H. D. Brown (2001), "Roleplay minimally involves a) giving a role to one or more members of a group, and b) assigning a purpose or objective that participants must accomplish" (p.183). Roleplay should be distinguished from simulations, which tend to be longer and more elaborate. Roleplay is a type of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) often used by teachers and researchers to assess learner linguistic competence (Brown, 2001). However, discussion with learners before or after the roleplay about the situation, roles, social distance, politeness, or other factors can be an effective way to help develop awareness and improve pragmatic competency (Kasper, 1997).

Practically speaking, roleplay is appealing to students because it gives them practice with language use in situations they are likely to encounter when traveling abroad or with foreigners in their own country. Unlike more controlled language learning activities, roleplays are tasks which fall towards the freer end of the language learning activity continuum discussed by Nunan (2004) and Richards and Rogers (2001), and give students practice accessing their current language resources. This builds fluency, but students must have adequate language ability to be successful with roleplay. Their English level should ideally be at least high-beginner or lower-intermediate. Also, as a general rule, the lower the student level, the more support students will need in order to do the roleplay successfully.

Because of the unpredictability inherent in roleplay, students are also pushed to develop the flexibility necessary to deal with real world communicative exchanges. However, if students' previous language learning experiences have been mainly doing controlled language practice activities in teacher-fronted classes, students may need extra support and modeling to get accustomed to the demands of roleplay. In addition, there may be more general cultural factors at play that can prevent students from speaking freely. If they are not sure that their English is

correctly formed, Japanese students may opt for silence rather than publicly make errors. Conversely, if their ability level is high, their silence may be due to a reticence to shine and stand out from their peers.

These general cultural factors, as well as previous language learning experiences and ability level all need to be taken into consideration when designing roleplay activities. Especially with roleplay, care needs to be taken to insure students are initially successful as this lays the groundwork for later activities. In the discussion that follows I will mainly use a restaurant roleplay to exemplify the key points of doing successful roleplay, before, during, and after the activity.

### **Before the roleplay**

When doing relatively unstructured language learning activities like roleplay, throwing Japanese students into the deep end with little preparation is likely to lead to failure or limited gains. Solid preparation beforehand is a major success factor.

### **Discussion**

Build interest in the roleplay by engaging students in discussion about the topic, situation, and roles involved. For example, if the roleplay is to take place in a restaurant, discussion questions such as these can be provided:

- *What is your favorite restaurant?*
- *If you worked in a restaurant, what job would you prefer? Cook? Waitress/waiter? Manager?*
- *Have you ever had bad service in a restaurant? What did you do about it?*

Depending on the time available, class goals, and ability levels, students can be asked to discuss questions like these in pairs or small groups, or you can use these questions as a whole class activity by eliciting answers from individual students. These are good ways of activating vocabulary related to the topic and for introducing new terms and expressions that will be needed later in the roleplay.

## **Creative projects**

Engage students in creative projects related to the roleplay. For example, with a restaurant roleplay, students can be asked to create menus for a restaurant they will work in. Tasks like this build interest in the topic and lead students in developing the vocabulary they will need.

## **Overview**

Give students an overview of the roleplay they will do by writing the situation, roles, problem, and useful language on the board. For example, in a restaurant roleplay I write the following information on the board:

Situation: Ordering food in a restaurant

Roles: Customer  
Waiter/Waitress  
Manager

Problem: (explain roles/problems)

Useful Language: (provide model dialog)

## **Situation**

Discuss with students how to make the classroom seem more like the roleplay setting as this will help students get into their roles. For example, if chairs are moveable, arrange them to simulate the roleplay setting. Additionally, students can knock before entering rooms and sit or stand depending on what one would normally do in the situation.

## **Roles**

In roleplay, there is not a crowd, so in general I like to create a third role of supervisor or manager in roleplays whenever possible. I ask the supervisor to stand apart from the roleplay and encourage the active students to not resolve their problem. This makes it necessary to call over the supervisor in order to resolve it. The students doing the roleplay must explain to their supervisor the whole situation and problem from the beginning. Then the supervisor can discuss possible solutions with the other participants. This approach extends the amount of language practice students receive and requires them to develop problem solving and summary skills.

## **Problem**

Explain that in most communicative situations there is some problem to solve. At a basic level, in a restaurant roleplay the customer wants to get some food. This provides the basis for doing the roleplay straight. Doing the roleplay in this way gives students good basic practice, but for extension, make it more interesting and introduce an element of unpredictability. For example, provide students with additional roles or problems that lead to other types of discussions. For example, in the restaurant roleplay, after students have done it straight, I give them additional problems and roles such as these:

Customer roles

- The customer is cheap
- The customer is indecisive
- The customer likes the waiter/waitress

Waiter/Waitress roles

- The waiter/waitress is bossy
- The waiter/waitress is very busy
- The waiter/waitress has a poor memory

Students choose a role, keep it a secret, then do the roleplay. When the activity is finished, the group members should try to guess what role each was playing. With more challenging roles, students will benefit from your explanation and modeling of how language choice and body language can be used to express the role.

## **Useful language**

Students will need some help with necessary language. Depending on student level, this can be a complete model conversation or just some useful expressions for the particular situation. This is a good time to discuss pragmatic aspects of language use such as social distance, politeness, or level of formality. For example, in the restaurant roleplay, the level of politeness used by the waitress/waiter would likely vary depending on the type of establishment. Some useful expressions in a restaurant roleplay would be:

- *Hi, can I take your order?*
- *Yes, I'd like.....*
- *What would you like to drink with your meal?*
- *Excuse me, could I speak with the manager?*

### **Body language**

Not only do students need help with the language necessary to express their roles, but they will need instruction or at least a reminder to use appropriate body language. Especially early in the course, it would help students if you can model how facial expressions, gestures, and the body (i.e. posture) are used to express different roles and the emotions likely to arise, such as impatience or indecision.

### **Class size**

Consider class size when setting up the roleplay. Larger classes of 25 to 40 will require more care when explaining and modeling. Smaller classes allow you to join in as a participant, which is especially useful if one group lacks a third member.

### **During the roleplay**

#### **Props**

Bring the roleplay to life by using props whenever possible. For example, in a restaurant roleplay students can be asked to create menus or the waiter/waitress can pretend to have an order pad. A folded piece of paper, an electronic dictionary, or even a small book can be used to simulate such a pad.

#### **Supervision and feedback**

Monitor the different roleplays going on in the classroom and be prepared to give feedback on how they can be improved in terms of language use, body language, and process. After one round of roleplays, the group members or roles can be switched so that students can get experience with the other roles. Before beginning a second round, however, give some feedback and suggestions for improvement based on the first round. Further language support or modeling of proper body language may be necessary.

### **Encourage creativity**

After observing one round of roleplays, you may wish to encourage greater creativity and risk taking by citing examples of creativity observed or by explaining your own ideas for creative problem solving that arose during the first round. Some roles will benefit from the suggestion that *it can be fun to be bad*. However, be careful that students do not get overly excited and move past the bounds of good taste.

### **Join in**

You may want to join in the roleplay by taking on a role. This can be fun for you and is often a good way to deal with a group that is blocked or too unadventurous. Additionally, the lack of a teacher-observer often reduces student inhibitions.

### **Stubbornness**

Encourage stubbornness in the roleplay participants. If problems are resolved easily, then the amount of language exchanged can be minimal. By encouraging students to stand their ground and not give in when there is a problem, the roleplay is lengthened and students get more practice. This also necessitates the introduction of a supervisor to solve the problem, further extending the roleplay. This can be especially useful practice for students planning to visit countries where *the squeaky wheel gets the grease*, where complaining is more common, or where standing up for oneself is more necessary.

### **Challenging roles**

Allow students to choose a role or problem they like the first time, but in later rounds, encourage them to take on more challenging roles. One way of doing this is by asking students to use what I call the *fickle finger of fate* to decide their roles: Students close their eyes and put their finger down to the page containing the different roles and problems and leave role selection up to chance.

### **Repeat the roleplay**

Do not be in a hurry to move on to the next activity. Having students repeat the roleplay several

times is a great way to build confidence and fluency. By giving everyone new partners and asking them to take on different roles, they will become more comfortable, and the benefits of the activity will be extended.

### **Roleplay design**

Let students design their own roleplays where they decide the situation and create their own problems and roles to act out. This last step will challenge students to be creative and often results in unpredictable and humorous exchanges.

### **After the roleplay**

#### **Final feedback**

When the roleplays are finished, do a final feedback session with the whole class. Provide correction and comments on language use, creativity, and process. This debriefing will help students get out of their roles.

#### **Recording**

If possible, video the roleplays, using the recordings to help students become aware of their strengths and weaknesses with English. Watching the recordings is an especially good way for students to become aware of the importance of body language, gestures, and facial expressions during communication. These recordings can be watched and evaluated individually, by the roleplay group, or by the class as a whole. It is a good idea to provide students with questions to guide their reflection (see Appendix).

#### **Reflect on results**

When the roleplay is finished, think back on the choices you made along the way and the results that occurred. Early in the term, I have had the best results with roleplay situations that students could easily imagine themselves being in when traveling, such as the restaurant, shopping, and airport roleplays. Later in the term, I am more likely to ask students to do roleplays that require more imagination, such as being an inventor or charity organizer. When roleplays have not worked well for me, it has often been because there was a mismatch between the demands

of the roleplay and student abilities or interest. Through experience you will get better at matching roleplays to the needs of each class.

### **Conclusion**

Roleplay may not be a natural match for Japanese language classrooms due to students' previous learning experiences, which have often focused on form in relatively controlled activities. However, if roleplays are set up carefully, students can get useful practice in situations they are likely to encounter abroad, while developing fluency and the confidence to deal with the unpredictability inherent in real world language use, all within the relatively safe environment of a classroom. Finally, successful roleplays can transform the atmosphere of the classroom into a more fun and exciting place where anything can happen and probably will.

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## Appendix

### Roleplay video reflection form for students

#### Roleplay video reflection form

Directions: Watch the video recording of your roleplay and answer the questions below.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1. How was your voice? Was it too loud, too soft, too flat? How could you improve?</p>  | <p>5. How was your vocabulary? What mistakes did you make with vocabulary and how would you correct them? List your mistakes and correct them, as in the example.</p> <p><i>Mistake</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I had a <u>trouble</u> with the waiter.</li> </ul> <p><i>Correction</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I had a <u>problem</u> with the waiter.</li> </ul> |
| <p>2. How was your pronunciation? Was it clear, did you speak too fast? How could you improve?</p>   | <p>6. Were there any things you wanted to say but did not know the English words?</p> <p>List them below in Japanese, with their English equivalents, as in the example.</p> <p><i>Japanese</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shoyu</li> </ul> <p><i>English</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• soy sauce</li> </ul>  |
| <p>3. How was your body language? Did you use gestures, posture, facial expressions to help you communicate your feelings, attitudes and ideas? How could you improve?</p>   | <p>7. What do you think you did well in the roleplay?</p>  |
| <p>4. How was your grammar? What grammar mistakes did you make and how would you correct them?</p> <p>List the mistakes and correct them, as in the example.</p> <p><i>Mistake</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How much <u>costs</u> the special?</li> </ul> <p><i>Correction</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How much <u>does</u> the special <u>cost</u>?</li> </ul> | <p>8. Did you notice anything else you'd like to improve?</p>  |