

E.X.P.E.R.T. Role Play Technique for Workplace Readiness

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ABSTRACT

Role plays and the instructional methods which take place in traditional classroom context do not hinder learners from actively and meaningfully engaging the role of an expert naturally and realistically. The majority of the employers indicated that most fresh graduates are not ready to enter the job market as they lack the command of the English language, as well as communication skills and other workplace related skills. This paper presents how “E.X.P.E.R.T.” role play technique is used in an academic English course classroom to address the concerns of workplace readiness among the fresh graduates. The researchers employed an in depth qualitative study through written reflections to capture the experiences, and insights of undergraduates at one of the Malaysian public universities. A total of nineteen learners from the Faculty of Health Sciences took part in this study. The findings indicate that E.X.P.E.R.T. technique promotes a more dynamic and up-to-date learning approach in equipping learners with the essential employability skills. It also highlights the teacher’s pedagogical role in employing the “E.X.P.E.R.T.” role play technique.

Keywords: Employability; “E.X.P.E.R.T.”; role play technique; engaging; workforce

INTRODUCTION

Nations and regions of the world are strategically planning by allocating funds and researching formal education to develop their workforce in readiness to meet the demands of the future workforce. Institutions of higher education are entrusted by societies to equip university learners with global employability skills and 21st century competencies skills that are needed in the future workforce. These institutions of higher education are often seen as training platforms for both equipping and preparing graduates who can compete globally and establish international networking with their co-workers from other high performing nations.

A study conducted by Oluwatayo et al. (2016) claimed that formal education provided by universities does not prepare learners adequately for the world of work. Oluwatayo et al. (2016), further emphasised that the academic courses which learners underwent during their course of study did not develop their confidence and readiness to enter the workforce. Meanwhile, Caballero and Walker (2010) maintained that a “work ready” attribute is essential to be developed by graduates as this is an indicator of their capabilities to succeed in their future jobs and career advancement. As the nature of the workplace is changing rapidly,

it is inevitable for educators to relate classroom learning experiences to the real world of work (Boud, 2010). Educators need to incorporate work-related competencies and experiences to ensure learners gain the utmost benefits from implementing lessons learned in simulated workplace classroom.

The education system provided by a nation and its education institutions have to keep pace with changing times which are often connected to a “rapidly transforming, technology-driven, and interconnected globalized world” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Curriculums which are not relevant to the job market, global workforce skills and 21st century competencies may result in graduates not fulfilling employers’ needs. These graduates may remain unemployed for some time until they find a suitable job that matches their skills and competencies. Rajprasit and Hemchua (2015) reported that new Thai engineering graduates were observed having difficulties in terms of English workplace communication where employers were disappointed with the communication skills displayed by these engineers.

It was reported that 200,000 learners from Malaysian higher institution of education graduate annually, but one in four fresh graduates will remain unemployed after six months after graduation (Rajvinder Singh The Sundaily.com 2016). Many of these unemployed fresh graduates are from public universities. The most common reasons given by employers for not employing these fresh graduates are their poor attitude, poor command of the English language and poor communication skills (Leo 2016). Thang et al. (2016) highlighted that in Malaysia, learners who have a high proficiency in English will find it easier to be employed. Other contributing factors that are also mentioned by employers are the inability of these fresh graduates to adapt themselves well in a working environment; they also did not have sufficient knowledge and competency in the jobs that they applied for. These graduates are not able to deliver effectively a task which needs them to do multitasking, decision making and problem solving.

This worrying trend has raised the alarm and made news headlines and it has even been discussed in the parliament. This pressing issue has prompted for a need to construct and develop meaningful work-based learning experience when learners are furthering their studies at public universities. Reflecting on the aforementioned concerns of the low employability among Malaysian fresh graduates which are due to their poor command of the English language, lack of communication skills and other workplace related skills, this paper presents the use of the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique in one of the English courses offered at one of the universities in Malaysia. The course is aimed to help learners to enhance their language skills with emphasis on reading, writing and presentations in academic contexts.

E.X.P.E.R.T ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE

The model of the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique refers to six meaningful work-related learning events or phases which learners are required to experience whilst completing their assignments in the English course. The manifestation of the proposed technique was guided by the pedagogy of employability. Pegg et al. (2006) define the pedagogy of employability as an approach that promotes both effective learning and employability for learners at higher education institutions (HEIs). The approach integrates employability skills with teaching and learning through and across the disciplines of studies. The proposed “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play model made it necessary for learners to identify, associate and enact the profession they foresee they will be when they join the workforce. The *Six Learning Events/Phases* of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique that were systematically embedded in the model will allow learners to gain invaluable insights into their future vocation and working life. Even

though the implementation of the role plays and the instructional methods took place in a traditional classroom context as compared to a living lab that replicates the real workplace setting and environment, these do not hinder the learners from actively and meaningfully engaging the role of an expert naturally and realistically.

This proposed “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique adopted Davis and Warfield (2011) and Kryder’s (2011) instructional method in preparing learners for career within the limited context of a classroom. Within the limitation of a classroom context, role play instructional method provides better opportunities for learners to make contact with professionals in their chosen field to complete the tasks given to them by their teachers. They can use social media to establish networking with other experts in their chosen field. The process and the experience of establishing networking with professionals in the learners’ preferred discipline shapes the knowledge of these learners regarding their preferred fields, their preparations to enter the field, their attitude towards the field and their readiness to enter their field of work (Davis & Warfield 2011, Kryder 2011). The role play instructional method shows that when class assignments are related to the real world, they can better motivate learners not only to complete them but also to put in more efforts.

In the process of completing the two main tasks, the proposed “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique guided learners through the six learning events/phases which are:

- Learning Event/Phase One : Expert
- Learning Event/Phase Two : “X” factors
- Learning Event/Phase Three : Personify
- Learning Event/Phase Four : Engaged
- Learning Event/Phase Five : Relevant, Referred, Respected
- Learning Event/Phase Six : Talent

Figure 1 below illustrates the six *Learning Events/Phases of “E.X.P.E.R.T”* role play technique through which the learners underwent in while delivering their informative speech and in completing their expository essay while the subsequent section describes its implementation and what entails in each learning event/phase.

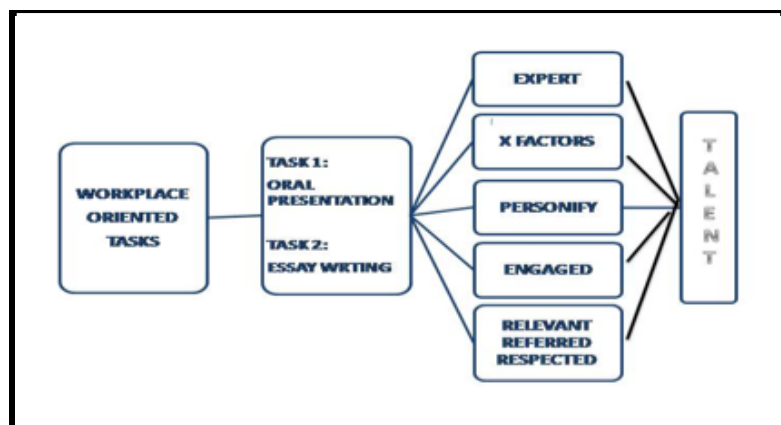


FIGURE 1. The six Learning Events/Phases of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” Role Play Technique

THE UNDERLYING CONCEPTS OF “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE

The underlying concepts that scaffolded the framework of the six work-related learning events/phases in the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play model was constructively aligned with the pedagogy of employability and Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory. Pegg et al. (2006)

define the pedagogy of employability as the teaching and learning of a wide range of knowledge, skills and attributes to support continued learning and career development (2006, p. 7). In the proposed model above (Figure 1), effective, engaging and meaningful learning events were constructed, mirroring work situations and tasks. Among the work situations and tasks that learners are required to perform are establishing themselves as experts in their field, sharing and giving their opinions from the viewpoint of an expert, discovering and identifying the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes or behaviours of their chosen expert role and presenting a relevant issue to their classmates who are also assuming the roles of experts from various disciplines.

The essence of work-based learning experiences employed in “*E.X.P.E.R.T* role play technique is the adaptation and manifestation of Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984), advocates learning as process oriented. Kolb describes learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (1984, p. 41.)”. In order to operationalise Kolb’s theory into the context of the proposed technique, learners are required to progress through the proposed *Six Learning Events/Phases* for effective learning to take place. The learners will be interacting meaningfully, engaging with the different contexts and making sense of the experiences gained as they progress from one learning event or phase to another. The learners will select significant “gains” and further transform them into practical knowledge and skilful practices that are appropriate for future use.

These *Six Learning Events/Phases* provided systematic informal workplace training in an academic setting. This paper discusses the rationale for using role play as workplace orientation, the implementation of the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique, as well as the effects of the technique on the learners and the pedagogical implications.

WHY THE ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE?

Role play technique is still significant and commonly used in the teaching and learning of English language as it has several advantages. According to Krebt (2017), role play is participation in simulated social situations that are intended to illustrate the roles and contexts that govern ‘real life’ social episode. In a classroom context, role play involves a learner taking on, practicing and acting unfamiliar specific roles in case-based scenario for the purpose of learning. Learners have to model the specific role realistically by displaying the characteristics and mannerism of the roles they are portraying.

Role play as a tool in facilitating learning proves to be effective in reaching learning outcomes in three major learning domains: affective, cognitive, and behavioural (Maier 2002, Rao & Stupans 2012). By instructing learners to simulate the role of another person, they put into practice communicating, empathising and perspective taking. Learners become conscious of their strengths and weakness as they reflect upon themselves how well they had performed the role (Westrup & Planander 2013, Sogunro 2004). Learning becomes easy for learners when they successfully transform and transfer the theory they learned into practical skills. This evidently displays the learners’ ability in linking a deeper cognitive to the materials used (McEwen et. al. 2014, Walsh & Mann 2015). Finally, role play employed as a training tool has the capacity to change behaviours and use only the best practices in real-world settings (Qing 2011, Shangeetha & Rajah Kumaran 2017, Raja Hazirah Raja Sulaiman et al. 2017, Mohamad Jafre Zainol Abidin et al. 2012)

Acknowledging the benefits of role play as pedagogical method, there is a need to explore its potential in preparing learners as talents for the industry (Craciun 2010, Kamerade 2011). Role play as workplace orientation will be an integral component in the implementation of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play model that encourages and motivates learners in

higher education to involve in active and deep learning (Westrup & Planander 2013, Gleason et al. 2011). During each learning phase learners will be actively attaining practical experience and rehearsing the skills they will need in real life in a risk-free environment of the classroom. The positive atmosphere creates a conducive climate in the classroom whereby learners become more willing and keen to practice the role playing of workplace situations. The frequent practice allows learners to apply their new knowledge in various simulated work-related situations before they have to face the real world (Westrup & Planander 2013, Gleason et al. 2011, Scott 2015, Kilgour 2015).

METHOD

The researchers employed an in depth qualitative study in capturing the experiences and insights of participants involved in this study. Nineteen (19) Malaysian undergraduate learners from the Faculty of Health Sciences took part in this study. These learners were in their 2nd year of study and the average age of these participants was between 20 to 22 years old. The duration of the respective course the learners were taking was for 14 weeks which was for a semester period of study for the course. Learners were guided and facilitated by the teacher researcher in experiencing the six phases that were structured in the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique. The six work based learning events/phases embedded in the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique were stimulating, engaging and meaningful for learners to link and construct meanings from their experiences.

The process involves, firstly, the learner to retrospectively look on his/her past learning experiences and what he or she did to enable learning to take place. Secondly, it involves the learner to explore the relations between the knowledge that was taught and the learner’s own ideas about them. These two elements, which are how the learning took place and on just what was learned, will be the focal point of the learners’ self-reflections. Throughout the class, the participants were required to reflect on their experiences. The learners’ reflections focus on individual’s personal experiences that engage learners to explore their experience. Those intellectual and affective activities where individuals are engaged to explore their experience will lead to new understanding and appreciations (Boud et al.,1985; Walsh and Mann, 2017) Learners’ feedback forms the basis to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed technique and also as a reference as to which aspect of the technique needs further improvement or improvisation. Alphanumerical codes (R1 – R17) were used to represent researched learners for confidentiality purpose. Using content analysis, learners’ reflections were analysed to identify emerging themes. These themes were then coded based on emerging categories.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF “E.X.P.E.R.T.” ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE

As most jobs require the candidate to have good written and oral communication skills, these two communication skills are given due emphasis in the course. The course is designed for learners with the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Band 2 and 3 and for learners who have passed a foundation English course. This course enhances learners’ language skills with the emphasis on reading, writing and presentations in academic contexts. The learners are to conduct an academic study on an issue of interest and write an expository essay on it. Learners are given the freedom to choose any topic provided that it is studied and presented from an academic point of view. Following their written expository essays, they are required to share the information with an audience who are their classmates and their language

teacher. In researching the topic, writing the expository essay and presenting the main ideas from their expository essay, learners are instructed to invent and transform themselves into the experts they aspire to be: nutritionist, dietician, financial analyst, motivator, counsellor, psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and religious officer.

When learners participate in workplace-based activities embedded in the six workplace learning events or phases, unconsciously learners are equipping themselves with the knowledge, skills and language competencies for them to function professionally at their prospect workplace. The proposed “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique was integrated into the existing learning process of Academic Communication I course. The elements of work-based situations and experiences are hoped to further reinforce the learning process for employability. For the learning process to be meaningful, engaging and purposeful for learners, 6 learning events/phases of work-based activities and “near real life” experiences are progressively constructed and encountered.

THE EVENTS/PHASES OF *E.X.P.E.R.T*” ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE

In completing the two assignments (informative speech and expository essay writing) for the course, learners were guided by the teacher researcher through the Six *Learning Events /Phases* of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique. As mentioned earlier, to operationalize Kolb’s theory into the context of the proposed technique, learners are required to progress through the proposed *Six Learning Events/Phases* for effective learning to take place. As he poses that “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (1984: 41.)” It is thus, important that learners were given the choice to select the appropriate activities/tasks. In the implementation of these phases of the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique, the teacher ensures that the objectives of the course are not compromised.

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE ONE: IDENTIFYING THE EXPERT

Learning Event/Phase One is identifying a role of an expert whom the learners want to be associated with. Each learner was required to identify an expert or a specialist representing his field of study or profession. In order to identify and define an expert the learner wishes to role play, he had to know his field of study well and what professions are commonly connected with his/her field of study. These experts’ roles the learners have chosen may inspire them to become one in their career. The learning event of establishing the expert role can be regarded as a preparation for learners to enter their field as stated by a study conducted by Kaufman et al. (2010). The study shows that the process of establishing contacts with professionals in their preferred fields might influence the knowledge of undergraduate learners about their preferred fields, their preparation to enter the field, and their attitudes towards the transition (Kaufman et al. 2010).

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE TWO: RESEARCHING AND IDENTIFYING THE “X” FACTORS

Learning Event/Phase Two required learners to research, discover and identify the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes and behaviours of their chosen expert role. Learners familiarised themselves with the exceptional qualities that shape the personal qualities, desirable traits, appearance and personal characteristics of their role. By analysing and familiarising themselves with the exceptional qualities of their defined role, it will cause learners to reflect on their own traits, noting their own strengths and weaknesses.

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE THREE: PERSONIFY (ELICITING PERFORMANCE: PRACTICING)

Learning Event/Phase Three involved learners rehearsing and practicing the personal qualities, desirable traits, expected appearance and emotions of their chosen role in different situations. They invented, altered and assumed the character of another person. When the learners personified a role, the process they underwent replicated Rao & Stupans (2012) typology for organizing various role-play activities that are used in higher education: ‘role-switch,’ ‘acting,’ and ‘almost real life.’ ‘Role-switch’ requires the learners to take on the role of another person. When learners switch role, they need to understand the actions and motivations of someone else. In this ‘acting’ role-plays, learners get the opportunity to practice newly-developed skills through the simulations where respective skills are required. These simulations denote the experiences and the situations that learners undergo in acting their roles would depict an experience as close to the real experience as it possibly could be.

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE FOUR: ENGAGED (INTERNALIZING AND REINFORCING)

In *Learning Event/Phase Four* learners engaged and reinforced their defined expert roles. They were constantly reminding themselves that they were now the experts. The familiarisation process in *Learning Event Two* has equipped them with the knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes of the defined role they chose to be in *Learning Event One*. In accomplishing the assigned tasks (informative speech and problem-solving essay), they had to adopt, sustain, and engage the defined role at all time in different context. Among the expert roles that the learners chose to be were nutritionist, dietician, financial analyst, motivator, counsellor, psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and religious officer. The voice of an expert was heard and read by both the authentic audience and readers. The assigned tasks were real and relevant to them as they would be addressing a pertinent current issue not only to a target community but also with other ‘experts’ from various fields such as health sciences, religious studies, psychology and occupational therapy. Hence, learners’ engagement with their role was continuously sustained in both the classroom and outside the classroom context.

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE FIVE: RESPECTED, RELEVANT, REFERRED (ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING ONE’S CREDIBILITY)

Learning Event/Phase Five instilled and shaped the learners’ mindset on the concept of being relevant, referred to and respected. The learning experiences objectively stimulated in *Learning Event One* until *Four* would have enhanced learners’ self-confidence, credibility, self - esteem and motivation. Thus, this will make them feel relevant and important to the community. As the spokesperson representing their field, they were made to realize that they have a significant role to play in the society. They were made aware as an expert, professionally, that they will be constantly referred to and highly respected by the community. They reminded themselves to display and maintain a positive image when socializing with the community.

The learning experience working in a synergy group provided the opportunity for the learners to practice socializing and interacting with people representing different communities. Hence, these experiences would further establish their credibility as an expert. Furthermore, the engagement with the “community” would result in them gaining self-respect and building self -confidence. Self-respect, self-confidence and interpersonal skills are essential in building networking. Jenkins (2011) emphasizes the need for learners to see the value of learning networking skills and how professional networking relates to them personally. This phase demanded learners to regularly remind themselves, as an expert, that

they are obligated to fulfil the expectations of the industry and the community. As a person with an authoritative voice, they are expected to either share their opinions on a current issue, assist in solving a problem or being invited as a guest writer to educate a target community. To maintain being relevant, referred to and respected by the society, the role play will be a catalyst for them to continually enhance their knowledge, reinforce their fine qualities and enrich their potentials.

LEARNING EVENT/PHASE SIX: TALENT (ENHANCING RETENTION AND TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO THE JOB)

Learning Event/Phase Six is where the learners experienced the feeling of establishing themselves as talents who are sought after by employers. This was made possible when learners shared their expert's voice on a current issue with an authentic audience via oral presentation and expository essay. These "near real life" working experiences and situations would make learners better prepared to enter the professional workforce. This phase forced learners to display self-confidence and self-belief that their competencies, skills and knowledge of work would enable them to function effectively at work place. By delivering a speech and producing an expository essay, learners experienced practicing and transferring their skills to fulfil work-related tasks. The "E.X.P.E.R.T" role model technique allows learners to undergo sufficient training and rehearsing knowledge, communication skills and sensitivity to express attitude and emotions. The right mix of knowledge, skills and attitudes/behaviours, helps a job holder to perform tasks successfully.

LEARNER REFLECTIONS

The six work-based learning events/phases embedded in the "E.X.P.E.R.T" role play technique is stimulating, engaging and meaningful for learners to link and construct meaning from their experiences. Learners must be given ample time and opportunity to reflect. Learners need to reflect in order for them to administer self-auditing to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This is important as this will give them the opportunity either to develop or enhance their knowledge, skills and attributes. Their feedback will be the basis to gauge the effectiveness of the proposed technique and also as a reference as to which aspect of the technique needs further improvement or improvisation. On analysing the learners' reflections, emerging themes begin to appear. Five main themes indicating that the role playing of an expert or specialist had enhanced learners' knowledge, English language proficiency, language skills, social skills and work-based related began to appear. However, in this paper, only two main themes and sub-themes that emerged from learners' reflections – role play in general and workplace readiness- will be highlighted.

Below are the compilations of learners' reflection on their feelings, thoughts and insights in undergoing the "E.X.P.E.R.T" role play technique. In the discussion of the student reflection analysis, each student respondent is labelled 'R' to refer to 'respondent' with a number that codes each student respondent using the alphanumeric coding.

ROLE PLAY IN GENERAL

Generally, the learners found the "E.X.P.E.R.T" role play technique as fun, exciting, enjoyable, interesting and meaningful. A learner claimed that she liked the role play technique so much that it made her writing task enjoyable. While another learner expressed that the role play technique is a "brilliant" technique to be employed in delivering a speech

and writing an essay. The excerpts of the learners' positive reaction towards role play are listed below:

R7: *It is a learning technique that is fun and exciting.*

R13: *The role play technique is a part where I really (10x) like ...I enjoyed doing the writing speech.*

R8: *I think the role play technique which I used to deliver my speech and in writing an essay was brilliant.*

This relaxing and less threatening environment produced by role play technique is exactly what is needed for learners to optimise the learning experience and maximize the benefits gained. The learners asserted that the role play technique has created their interest to learn English, developed their passion in enhancing the English language and provided opportunities for them to rectify their language errors (R9). A learner indicated she became more focused during the English class and she related *"the experience is interesting and give me a lot of experience and information"* (R10); meanwhile, another learner accounted that her learning experience has transformed her from a passive and a reserved learner to an active learner (R14). Learners related the roleplaying experiences positively. Below are what some learners perceived they gained from the role play technique:

R9: *A lot of knowledge and experience I had gained... This class is very enjoying and meaningful for me... I think it is good to do role play technique before deliver the speech and essay because from that we can improved our mistakes that we made before truly deliver to the audience or write the essay.*

R14: *Among them, I found my interest in English tend to increase. Before, I was very passive and reserved...*

R10: *I felt excitement along the way I learnt. I can focus more on this subject ...*

The learners also indicated that their interest and the feel of joy in learning English is due to the expert role they took on. They also acknowledged that from the role playing they can either increase or enhance their knowledge as *"every second was filled with knowledge"* (R11). Another learner specified from the role play activities she discovered new knowledge: *"learnt about new things such as new diseases"* (R8). Finally, the learners recognised that role playing also prepared them to face both real life and workplace situations; hence, they requested for the role play technique to be implemented every semester as the lessons equipped them with the relevant knowledge and skills which they can apply in their daily lives. Some of the comments from the learners were:

R10: *Finally, I think we should do more classes like this in every semester... it can improve our knowledge...*

R15: *Many positive aspects that I could learn during this lesson and can implement it myself ...*

The role play technique has successfully developed the learners' confidence. Learners used the words "boost" (R2) and "increase" (R3) to describe how the role play improved their confidence level. While another learner reported with a marked increase in confidence level, he was "confident to face the audience" (R1) when delivering his speech. The learners commented:

R2: *For me, I think the role play technique which I used to deliver my speech and my essay helps me a lot in doing any research to find the good points so that I can deliver it well to public. Not only that, it also can boost my confidence level.*

R3: *I think the role play technique ...help me to increase my confident level*

R1: *From this presentation I surely can improve my English language and confident to face the audience.*

WORKPLACE READINESS

It is interesting to note that pedagogically, the role play technique has the potentials to prepare learners for the workplace. The role playing gave learners the engagement of “near real life” situations. Learners found the work-related learning experiences useful as the excerpts below show.

BUILD LEARNERS’ EXPERTISE AND STAY UP-TO-DATE WITH THEIR INDUSTRY

Learners reported that they have accumulated factual information about their field of study and their prospect profession.

R10: *The role that I chose before is human psychologist. This role play really suits me well and the topics is my interest which is about social media and I got a lot of information by the doing the research.*

R13: *It makes me feels like the job title that I choose is really what and who I am.*

EQUIP LEARNERS WITH PROFESSIONAL WORKPLACE SKILLS AND POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Most of the learners realised the importance of being professional; they noted the importance to speak and write in a professional manner. The learning experiences have managed to develop their willingness and readiness to deliver a speech and to share information with the people they interact at their future workplace.

R11: *... so I have a lot of experienced regarding social media so it easy to understand the attitude and personality among the social media user.*

R12: *The role play technique which I used to deliver my speech that I think it was very useful for my future presentation ... the role plays technique which I used to write my essay was also very useful, I can write in a professional way.*

R15: *During the presentation, we were requested to introduce ourselves and our profession. This makes me feel more confident and professional to share the information on the topic of my presentation. I hope in my future career, when I hold a position I can stand boldly to convey information to the public from the experience gained during my presentation in class.*

ENHANCE LEARNERS’ COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The expert role-play which required learners’ active involvement in delivering a speech was ingrained in the learners’ mind and behaviour. The skills of delivering a speech confidently would be useful for these learners to acquire as these skills are useful when the learners need to make presentations at their future workplace. In completing the tasks, they underwent a process that made them conscious and responsive to the experiences. They reported that the learning experiences made them aware on the elements of speech making. Most of the learners reported they “gain ways on how to deliver a good speech to the audience” (R1) and “the technique when delivering speech in the public” (R2):

R1: *I gain ways on how to deliver a good speech to the audience.*

R2: *also the technique when delivering speech in the public*

The usefulness of the ‘know-how’ in speech making has made a considerable influence on the learners’ mindset and behaviour. They are now better prepared and confident to deliver a speech. The learners reported:

1. they were able to identify detailed and specific information:

R8: *This technique helps me to be more in delivering new information to the audience.*

2. they were willing to deliver a speech even though they are weak in English. This is because they were able to reduce their anxiety by overcoming their fear and nervousness:
R9: I'm not afraid and nervous during giving a speech in front of audience. I had reduced my anxiety when I'm speak in English in front of them... weak in English.
3. they know how to attract the audience interest to listen to their speech:
R10: I also learnt on how to deliver speech through people and known on how to make people to interest with our speech.
4. they were able to instil the feeling of optimistic as their feeling of excitement overpowered their feeling of nervousness in delivering a speech:
R13: It makes me feel excited to delivered the speech to my audience but also nervous at the same time.
5. they believed the skills they acquired would help them to deliver a speech in a professional manner:
R12: learned how to become a good presenter/speaker in a professional way (not only language but also body language, eyes contact, and interacting with audiences are very important as well.
6. the learning experiences provided them with opportunities and the motivation to further improve their oral presentation skills by:
 - a. delivering the speech sincerely and understanding the information well.
R4: I was also able to improve the way of communication...delivering the speech sincerely and understanding the information well.
 - b. challenging themselves to deliver a different speech genre i.e. persuasive speech (pitching):
R3: technique on how to give pitching in a correct way.

ACQUISITION OF INFORMATION-LITERACY SKILLS

The abilities to establish when information is needed, gather information from a variety of sources including authoritative electronic sources, use information effectively, and create new knowledge are known as information-literacy skills (Markey & Mille 2015). The “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play learning events/phases evidently have induced learners’ basic skills in information literacy which learners need when they work. The role playing of a specialist called for the familiarization of the chosen character. The learners had to actively look for relevant information from various sources. The learners claimed that the numerous information seeking sessions which they underwent equipped them with seeking information skills which they can apply for future used. They acknowledged that the skill in seeking relevant information is essential in conducting research (R2 & R3). In addition, a learner highlighted he was exposed to internet use for information seeking when he needed to familiarize himself with the character he role played (R7). The excerpts of the learners’ shared account of their learning experiences are presented below:

- R2: helps me a lot in doing any research to find the good points*
R3: I think the role play technique which I used to deliver in my speech and my essay help me to do more research based on my role so that I can deliver it well.
R14: This technique makes it easier for me to find the information that I have played.
R7: I was exposed to information search techniques using the Internet medium.

APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACQUIRED SKILLS IN REAL LIFE SITUATIONS

The learners were able to make connections and sense out of their learning experiences. They were able to identify the knowledge and skills, which they can apply to future settings: socially, academically and vocationally. The role playing provided the learners with opportunities to model and practises a variety of habits. They claimed the knowledge and valuable experiences gained from the English course is useful for future used as it built their confidence and develop their readiness to practice the English language. The learners' aspirations are conveyed in the remarks below:

- R4: *English can be practised in the future.*
R11: *This course also gave me the opportunity to work with other courses.*
R14: *A variety of valuable experience and knowledge that I gained, and certainly all the knowledge that I will practice and apply in my daily life.*

In addition, the learners realised the knowledge they obtained not only built up their confidence but could also be transformed into other practical skills. They found the experiences to be “really helpful” as they could foresee themselves using the skills for future use, namely: they would be able to listen with understanding and empathy, apply the technique of writing a speech manuscript and essay, overcome and control speech anxiety and communicate in English confidently in both their English classes and other courses as well. Below are excerpts on the abovementioned claims made by the learners:

- R1: *I learn to accept other ideas from my friend and lecturer...*
R5: *I put into practise the technique that was taught in class to deliver my speech and to write my essay. The practice made me understand the requirement of the task.*
R13: *It is really helpful for me because it does help me on how to overcome and controlled my nervousness when I have to talk in front of community... to keep calm when they are in a situation where they need to talk with 'orang putih' especially or with those Malaysian people who are using English as their first language.*
R14: *become more confident to communicate in English ... not only during class English classes but during other subjects as well.*

Learners' reflection indicates that the role playing of an expert or specialist had enhanced their knowledge, English language proficiency, language skills, social skills and work-based related skills. Learners also mentioned they are now more confident, willing, prepared and ready to join the workforce in the future as they can utilize and transfer the skills they acquired from the course within the workplace context.

THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF “E.X.P.E.R.T” ROLE PLAY TECHNIQUE

The above learners' reflections prove that learners gained greatly from using the proposed “E.X.P.E.R.T” role play technique in an academic classroom setting. The numerous benefits learners gained from this technique are due to its unique features. These unique features can be the guiding principles for educators in exploiting role play technique in the classroom and optimising the learning benefits it generates for learners. The unique features highlighted below are derived from learners' reflections in undergoing the six learning work-related events/phases.

ENGAGEMENT WITH SIX PURPOSIVE WORK-RELATED LEARNING EVENTS/PHASES

The six purposive events/phases embedded in the expert role play technique display significant pedagogical traits. As each event/phase was planned and constructed aligning to the pedagogy of employability, it offers learners with rich and meaningful learning

experiences in academic, real life and work place context. These experiences will further develop learners' cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills that are much needed when they enter the workforce. These enabling skills will prepare them to function and face the challenges of workplace. Educators need to give due attention to the pedagogy of employability in order to produce employable graduates. Lucas and Hanson (2016) stress the necessity for the teaching and learning for employability to be embedded in all aspects of the life of colleges and training providers, rather than limiting it to a particular course or subject. Therefore, courses offered by the public universities in general, and English courses in specific, are highly encouraged to incorporate workplace orientation activities in a traditional classroom setting.

“ONE LEARNER - SINGLE CHARACTER” ROLE PLAY

Traditionally role play involves a pair or a group of learners consisting of three to four individuals to perform in front of the class for about 10 to 15 minutes. Then the learners will take on different roles. Uniquely, the proposed “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play differs from the traditional repertoire of role play. It demanded every learner to take on only a single professional role of his/her own choice throughout the whole semester. Learners acted their professional role repetitively in different situations throughout the semester. This single role play has that extra edge over the pair or group role play. Among them are, firstly, it allows the provision for all the learners to participate and be truly engaged in role playing as one of the biggest challenges of the role-playing technique is to get all learners to participate. Secondly, it stimulates learners' imagination and makes them more responsible for their own role playing. This is attained when learners give constructive comments and feedback of each other's' acting of their professional character. Next, learners become more confident. Learners who are shy and unwilling to perform in front of the class are able to overcome their shyness and build their confidence when they realize that most of their classmates are shy too and even the best learners make error. Lastly, as highlighted by Rudvin and Tomassini (2011), the teacher is able to monitor the learner's performances better by noting on the strengths and the weaknesses of individual learner. This is particularly effective for timid and passive learners as the teacher can pay more attention to them. The teacher can monitor at all times what is happening and can correct learners' errors and give constructive comment continuously.

INFORMAL WORKPLACE TRAINING IN CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The feasibility of creating and transforming an academic setting into a realistically work-based setting is another invaluable feature of this role play technique. This was made possible due to two factors. Firstly, the role play employed in the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique is made the core component of Academic Communication I course. Secondly, the role play activity is not a 'one-off' event or a communication exercise whereby learners perform and finish very quickly. It serves as an orientation workplace training platform whereby learners experience workplace tasks and situations. It is apparent that the term 'training' used in this context is not simply organizing classroom sessions. Oduke (2014) highlighted it is possible to transform a traditional classroom context into a professional context with the inclusion of professional and workplace- based episodes when conducting role play. When professional context is given due emphasis in playing the role and learning process per se, it provides an impetus that enables character building and professionalism.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES

The “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique was observed to create valuable opportunities for learners to develop professionalism. This is another key feature of the role play technique, that is, it has the capability to simulate workplace experiences in academic setting. The learning experiences reinforced learners’ significant connection with the context, roles and purpose of the task. Moreover, “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique called for the learners to act naturally and realistically in adopting their professional characters.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The aforementioned unique features of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique distinguished it further from the traditional mode of employing role play. This clearly shows that the “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique has extensive potentials to benefit learners academically, professionally and socially which traditional role play does not offer. Thus, this paper puts forward four foundational pedagogical principles in employing “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique as an effective and flexible tool in equipping learners with employability skills. The findings indicate several aspects of pedagogical implications.

THE ROLE OF TEACHER AND STUDENT

Learners seem to have enjoyed and found the phases of “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play to be useful and meaningful. This shows that for “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play to be effective, it is paramount for the teacher to take the role as a facilitator while the learner takes the role as the agent of learning. The teacher needs to learn to craft meaningful, realistic characters and relevant scenarios incorporating humour and real emotions to bring the role plays to life for the learners. Next, the teacher monitors and facilitates learners’ performances. This is done by teacher’s feedback which contributes to the improvement of learners’ performances. In giving feedback, teachers need to be mindful and observe open-mindedness and objectiveness. They need to be supportive and refrain themselves from giving judgmental feedback. Garewa (2013) reminded teachers in giving constructive feedback to learners, it has to be immediate, direct, simple, valid and in a very human way.

THE CLASS ENVIRONMENT

Learners expressed the ‘fun’ learning of English which puts forth that the class environment needs to be conducive and positive to increase learners’ active participation and to sustain their engagement in the role playing within the classroom and outside the classroom context. It is necessary for the learners to feel excited and relax when taking on their role as it gives them the sense of joy to be the other person. A non-threatening learning environment is an ideal platform for learners to overcome their anxieties and hence prepares learners for the space and time to interact within the learning and teaching process (Anjali Singh 2014).

CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT WITH WORK-RELATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The findings that learners find “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play had enhanced their knowledge and their English proficiency among others, the need to provide a continuous engagement with work-related learning experiences outside the classroom context must be made available for learners as role playing generated many real-life situations and activities for the learners to

practice. In completing an activity/task the learners can be instructed to form a synergy group. They are required to remain in their group throughout the semester. The synergy group which functions as a support group provides work-related learning experiences when learners socialize to brainstorm their ideas, share and exchange ideas, explain and answer enquiries from other group members. When learners share the knowledge and experiences about each other's tasks, they can develop better ideas and have a deeper understanding of the new gained knowledge. The learners can interact with their peers and teacher outside the classroom either face-to-face, using social media or smart phone chat applications. It is fundamentally important for teachers to nurture approachable and supportive social interactions with learners and among learners so that learning is endeavoured collaboratively and not competitively (CITL 2015).

This paper has established the versatility nature of role play. The improvisation of role play technique made it viable to transform a traditional classroom context and environment into an authentic platform for workplace orientation. It is hoped that the knowledge and the basic work-related skills learners acquired from the workplace training sessions make them work ready and employable.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided the insights as to how role play, a conventional learning approach, when it is manifested innovatively and systematically, can be transformed into a more dynamic and up-to-date learning approach in equipping learners with the essential employability skills. The “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique has shown its capability to stimulate and deepen authentic learning which demanded learners to be knowledgeable, linguistically productive, imaginative, creative and inventive. The “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique was observed to create valuable opportunities for learners to develop professionalism. This is another key feature of the role play technique, that is, it has the capability to simulate workplace experiences in academic setting. The learning experiences reinforced learners' significant connection with the context, roles and purpose of the task. When learners enlivened the expert role in different context and situations, unconsciously learners are equipping themselves with the knowledge, skills and language competencies for them to function professionally at their prospect workplace. The selected activities offered meaningful learning experiences for learners to develop their workplace abilities and to satisfy current and future needs of the industry. Moreover, “*E.X.P.E.R.T*” role play technique called for the learners to act naturally and realistically in adopting their characters. The chosen professions injected an essence of enjoyment, liveliness, richness and authenticity into the learning process. The learners were observed to invent and transform themselves into the experts they aspired to be: nutritionist, dietician, financial analyst, motivator, counsellor, psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and religious officer. In order for learners to display an authentic role playing, it involves having a considerable amount of talent, versatility and spontaneity. The attributes of being creative, inventive and critical thinkers will further develop learners' professionalism and empower their employability skills. In preparing learners to survive the 4th Industrial Revolution, it is suggested for further investigations to be carried out to explore the potential of role play as a technique to equip learners with the 21st century skills.

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