USING ROLE-PLAY TO DEVELOP B1 LEARNERS' SPEAKING FLUENCY

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Abstract. B1 learners of English often hesitate, rely on simple structures and struggle to sustain interaction. This literature-based article asks how structured role-play activities can support the development of speaking fluency at B1 level. Drawing on research on speech production, Communicative Language Teaching and task-based language teaching, it argues that role-play is most useful when it is aligned with learner needs, functional language objectives, interaction strategies and formative feedback. The methodology is organised around three questions: who to teach, what to teach and how to teach. A 45-minute lesson, "Planning a Weekend Trip", is proposed together with assessment criteria and digital tools. The pedagogical implication is that teachers should model language, scaffold preparation and give feedback that supports communication. The lesson has not been tested experimentally, and classroom-based research is needed to examine its usefulness.

Keywords: speaking fluency; role-play; B1 learners; Communicative Language Teaching; task-based language teaching; formative assessment; English language teaching

Introduction

Speaking fluency is one of the most visible indicators of communicative competence in a foreign language, yet it is difficult to develop in the classroom. Learners at B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) can usually manage everyday exchanges and express opinions on familiar topics (Council of Europe,

2020). Their speech, however, often remains hesitant: they pause to plan grammar and vocabulary, give minimal answers and find it hard to keep a conversation going when a partner says something unexpected.

Role-play is a communicative technique in which learners adopt assigned roles in a simulated situation and use language to achieve a shared purpose (Harmer, 2015; Littlewood, 1981). It is relevant to English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology because it brings together learner analysis, content selection and classroom procedure, but unstructured role-play can easily become repetitive or dominated by confident students. This article therefore examines the research question: *How can structured role-play activities support the development of speaking fluency among B1-level English language learners?* Its central argument is that structured role-play provides meaningful opportunities for spontaneous communication when it is aligned with learner needs, functional language objectives, interaction strategies and formative feedback.

Theoretical background

Fluency is commonly understood as the ability to produce speech at a natural pace with limited hesitation. Skehan (1998) treats fluency, accuracy and complexity as separate dimensions of performance and argues that, because learners' attention is limited, concentrating on one may reduce attention to the others. Bygate (1987) similarly distinguishes knowledge of a language from the skill of using it, stressing that speaking takes place under time pressure and depends on interaction routines. Accurate sentences produced slowly in controlled exercises therefore do not automatically become fluent speech; fluency requires practice in conditions resembling real interaction (Thornbury, 2005). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) holds that the goal of teaching is communicative competence rather than mastery of structures alone. Richards (2006) presents CLT as a set of principles, including attention to learners' needs, meaningful interaction and fluency activities alongside accuracy work. Littlewood (1981) distinguishes functional communication activities, in which learners exchange

information to solve a problem, from social interaction activities, which attend to the social setting of language use; role-play belongs mainly to the second group.

In task-based language teaching (TBLT), Ellis (2003) defines a task as an activity with a primary focus on meaning, a gap, and a communicative outcome beyond displaying language. A role-play therefore qualifies as a task only when it has an outcome, such as reaching an agreement, rather than the recitation of a prepared dialogue. Willis (1996) proposes a framework of pre-task, task cycle and language focus, while Thornbury (2005) suggests that speaking is taught through awareness, appropriation and autonomy. These ideas underpin the structure proposed below.

University learners at B1 level can typically cope with familiar situations but still find spontaneous interaction demanding (Council of Europe, 2020). Confidence and proficiency vary within a class, and it would be inappropriate to assume that all B1 learners are shy or equally motivated. Needs should instead be investigated through short questionnaires, diagnostic speaking tasks and observation. Learner analysis is thus the starting point for the other two decisions. Content should reflect what learners need to keep an interaction going. Functional expressions for suggesting, agreeing, disagreeing politely and compromising provide ready-made resources. Turn-taking and follow-up questions (for example, "Why do you prefer that?") extend conversations beyond one-line answers (Bygate, 1987), while clarification strategies help learners recover from breakdowns. Fillers, discourse markers and lexical chunks reduce planning load and make speech smoother (Thornbury, 2005). Pronunciation should be approached as intelligibility rather than native-like accent: Derwing and Munro (2005) argue that accent and comprehensibility are distinct and that teaching should prioritise features that affect understanding, which in practice may include word stress and rhythm.

Structured role-play can be implemented through five stages: modelling, language preparation, guided practice, pair interaction and formative feedback. The teacher first models a short interaction; learners then prepare a small set of phrases and practise them

in controlled, partly open dialogues, which lowers cognitive load before open performance (Skehan, 1998). During pair interaction, role cards state goals but provide no script. Formative feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998) follows, highlighting successful language and a few priority issues. This sequence reflects CLT because meaning and purposeful interaction remain central (Richards, 2006), and TBLT because the role-play has an outcome and is framed by pre-task and post-task stages (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). The three decisions thus form one chain: learner analysis determines the functions and strategies selected as content, and the content shapes how preparation and feedback are organised.

This section proposes a 45-minute lesson, "Planning a Weekend Trip". It is a pedagogical proposal derived from the literature and has not been tested experimentally. The target group is a B1 university class whose needs have been checked beforehand (see 3.1). By the end of the lesson, learners should be able to (1) use at least four functional expressions for suggesting, disagreeing politely and compromising; (2) sustain a three-to-four-minute pair conversation using follow-up questions; (3) use one clarification strategy when meaning is unclear; and (4) speak intelligibly enough for a partner to follow. Pairs discuss a recent trip and what makes a weekend away enjoyable. This activates vocabulary and experience and lowers anxiety, so fluency practice starts from familiar content.

Learners complete partly open mini-dialogues and change partners twice, building speed and automaticity while language remains supported. After one minute of silent planning, pairs receive the role cards below and must agree on a destination, transport and one activity. Conflicting preferences and a shared outcome require spontaneous negotiation, which is the core of the research question.

Learner A: City-break traveller	Learner B: Nature-lover
You want to spend the weekend in a city. You enjoy museums, cafés and local food, you prefer public transport, and you do not want to travel more than two hours. Your budget is limited. Persuade your partner and ask about his or her ideas.	You want to spend the weekend outdoors. You enjoy walking, camping and quiet places, and you are happy to travel up to three hours. You dislike crowds and expensive restaurants. Persuade your partner and ask about his or her ideas.

The teacher presents anonymised positive examples and two or three priority issues, such as unclear stress or abandoned sentences. Learners complete a digital exit ticket (or paper slip) naming three expressions they used and one aspect to improve. Assessment criteria should match the lesson objectives. *Continuity of speech* considers pace, pauses and recovery after hesitation. *Interaction and turn-taking* considers responses to the partner and follow-up questions. *Use of functional expressions* considers the range and appropriateness of taught phrases. *Intelligibility* considers whether a listener can follow the speech with reasonable effort (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Short descriptor scales informed by CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020) allow formative comments rather than only grades (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

With learners' consent, short smartphone recordings allow students to identify one area for improvement; online quizzes can check recognition of functional expressions; and digital exit tickets provide quick reflection data. Recordings should be stored securely on approved devices, used only for learning and deleted afterwards, and learners should be able to decline without penalty. Where devices or connectivity are limited, paper exit slips, teacher checklists and peer-observation sheets are suitable offline alternatives. Role-play has clear pedagogical potential: it gives a purpose for speaking, requires real-time responses and allows rehearsal in a low-risk setting. Challenges remain. Learners differ in proficiency and confidence, so role cards may need simplifying for some pairs and extending for others. Overdependence on scripts can turn the task into memorised performance; short planning time and a ban on written dialogues may reduce this risk. Most importantly, the lesson has not been evaluated in a classroom, and no

claim is made that it improves fluency; classroom-based research, such as action research with recorded performances and learner reflections, is needed.

Conclusion

Structured role-play can support B1 learners' speaking fluency by providing purposeful, outcome-oriented interaction backed by modelled language, guided practice and formative feedback. The argument developed here is that three decisions must be connected: investigating who the learners are, selecting the functions, strategies and pronunciation features they need, and choosing procedures that move from support to independence. Role-play should therefore be carefully structured and accompanied by assessment criteria that reflect the lesson objectives. Whether it produces measurable gains remains a question for future research.

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