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Stimulating Mastery Goal Orientation: EFL Students Using Role-Play with Children's Stories

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Abstract

A role-play activity consisting of a parent and child roles using children's stories was used with lower intermediate level Japanese EFL students in an attempt to stimulate a mastery goal orientation via the parent role. In this activity the teacher models the roles emphasizing an authoritative and engaging parent and inquisitive and easily distracted, somewhat disruptive child; overacting is stressed while passive role-playing is discouraged. Positive engaged body language, posture, and gestures are also modeled. Students take time to fully master their chosen children's stories with the teacher's support; students are repeatedly told to inquire about anything relating to their books. Students also are told to engage with and believe in their role as the all-knowing parent, which should be supported, by the barely-knowing child role. By having students master a few children's books and then role-play a parent who has mastered the target language, it is hoped that a mastery goal orientation can be instilled in a somewhat reverse process.

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Keywords: Children's stories; EFL; motivation; role-play.

1. Introduction

There is extensive literature attributing many positive results to drama for EFL and general education, but role-play activities are not prevalently used in the classroom and might first appear to be no more than light-hearted EFL games (DiNapoli, 2009, Dervishaj, 2009, Belliveau & Kim, 2013, and Sali & Bytyqi,



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2014). Similar to drama, role-plays are more often ad libis than scripted drama. Students must act out their character which is dependent on the various students they role-play with. This should foster more creativity and a closer approximation to real life. Role-play activities have been reported to be effective tools for L2 acquisition and for motivation (Maxwell, 1997, Kaur, 2002, Liu, 2010, and Barbee, 2014). They are also thought to be less threatening or low-anxiety classroom activities when compared to other methodologies (Maxwell, 1997); less stress is desirable as inhibition has been reported to have a negative influence on EFL learning (Mohseni & Ameri, 2010). Role-plays can also be devised to highlight cultural and nonverbal behavior (Maxwell, 1997); both important for mastering any language.

There is also extensive research highlighting the positive role motivation, most notably intrinsic motivation, plays in learning (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, Lai, 2011, and Cerasoli & Ford, 2014). Motivation determines your behavior as to what you spend your time and energy doing where intrinsic motivation is guided by personal feelings and extrinsic by external factors such as teachers or parents. Goal orientation is how you go about a task once you have determined what to do, and like motivation, it is generally classified into two types—mastery and performance—with mastery the more desirable of the two (Ames & Archer, 1988), which can be broken down into three and even four goal types when goal avoidance is factored in (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996, and Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

For both intrinsic motivation and a mastery goal orientation, external standards or definitions of success are less productive than personal drive and learning for its own sake—no focus on external accolades or status. Cerasoli and Ford state that mastery goals mediate the successful relationship between intrinsic motivation and performance (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014). Language learners who study abroad positively influence their intrinsic motivation and as well as language learning beliefs and self efficacy (Isabelli, 2006, Amuzie & Winke, 2009, and Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012) showing that environment can influence learner attitudes. Indeed, how to create a classroom environment that fosters intrinsic motivation and a mastery goal orientation is the focus of much research (Lai, 2011, O’Keefe, Ben-Eliyahu, & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013, and Cerasoli & Ford, 2014).

Carol Dweck's findings on mindset—again in two flavors, growth and fixed—provides another piece of the cognitive learning puzzle; it matters how you view your potential for learning. A growth mindset that your mental capacity is not static but rather depends on your own effort and input is important for how you view your possibilities and lack of self-imposed limits (Dweck, 2006).

There are many theories relating to learning, but the above three seem to be generally accepted and worthy of study. Whatever the method or theory, the educator's desired result is a self-regulated learner (Zimmerman, 1990) whether learned in class or assimilated via experience (Paris & Paris, 2001), who attempts to learn any subject, even one that is not in their comfort zone, working through failures and resourcefully working around less than ideal environments with the belief that hard work will eventually pay off.

2. Problem Statement

A mastery goal orientation is desired for EFL students, but how to instill one is not well understood. Methods that are thought to create a fertile environment for developing a mastery goal orientation are

unlike standard classroom environments which appear more geared towards fostering a performance goal orientation.

3. Research Questions

Can doing role-plays with children's stories in which one student acts as the parent who has mastered the target language reading to their role-play partner child instill a mastery goal orientation? Can a forced or manipulated mastery goal type achievement foster a mastery goal orientation stimulating the involved cognitive elements in a kind of reverse feedback?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not using children's stories for role-playing is an effective teaching method in an EFL context, and to initially explore whether role-playing the parent can stimulate a mastery mind set concerning the target second language, English.

5. Research Methods

Close to 60 Japanese EFL freshman students of mostly lower intermediate level taking an oral English class took part in the role-play lessons. There were a total of three 42-minute lesson over a two-week period. Each class consisted of ~15 students. The number of students did vary slightly during the study due to student absences.

Students were told that they were going to do a role-play activity in which they would form pairs and act out a parent reading a children's book to a child. Students were then told to choose two children's books—a few eager students eventually chose three—from a selection provided by the teacher. The books varied from simple books suitable for a two year old, to books recommended for a seven year old. All were picture books and varied from having a simple sentence or two per page to having a simple paragraph or more per page.

Students were told to take their time and try to completely understand, master, their chosen books. The teacher made it clear that students were to ask the teacher to clarify any issues (e.g., pronunciation or meaning). The teacher stressed that there would be no comprehension test, rather they should master their books as the role-play is between an "all-knowing" parent and their child; it behooved them to question the teacher as often as necessary so they could best play the parent. The teacher modeled both roles, parent and child, prior to the students mastering their books. It was emphasized repeatedly that a parent reading a children's book has no doubts—they are confident—about any aspects of the children's books they read to their children as they fully understand the material.

After students feel confident with their books, the teacher again models the role-play, but in more detail stressing that for best results they should act their parts to the fullest with parents believing they are the adult who has, of course, mastered their native language, or the child who sees the parent as supreme authority figure. Child's roles were also modeled with a range of options from inquisitive, disinterested, to disruptive; sudden changes of mood were acceptable for the child's role. Parents were also encouraged to read slowly with clear pronunciation in a higher than normal pitch and overemphasize pitch variation, and to try to engage their child by simple questions about the text or pictures, and nonsense or silly questions and answers were also discussed. Positive engaged body language, posture, and gestures were also modeled. The natural behavior of adults to use child-directed speech or "parentese" (Matychuk, 2005) was explained as were phrases of praise for the children to be used by the parents. This led to a brief explanation about Dweck's ideas about praising a child for the process, not intelligence or ability (Dweck, 2015), as the most effective child-rearing strategy to promote a growth, as opposed to a fixed, mindset (Dweck, 2006). Thus, as well-informed caring parents, the students want to do what is right for their children.

Students made pairs and took turns as reading parent or read to child. At times both students, i.e., parent and child, were required to ask a question on each set of two pages. When a book was finished, roles were changed. Students performed the activity with more than 10 partners.

Students were asked a few questions, informally by a show of hands, about the role-play activity in the next class following the completion of the three 42-minute classes devoted to the role-play. The first two questions were about how the students enjoyed the role-play activity, and should the activity be used in the oral class the following year; almost every student replied positively to both. The final question asked whether they felt like they understood their chosen books well which was still very positive, but less so than the other questions. Less than a quarter of the students (14 out of about 60 students) were questioned further in semi-structured interviews. There were only a few structured questions. The first two were about the importance of understanding and desire to completely master their chosen children's books. These questions were altered slightly from those of an achievement goal study (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The final question concerned the perceived anxiety of the role-play activity related to other activities done during the class or was the activity less threatening than others done in class (Maxwell, 1997).

6. Findings

The majority of students did actively dramatize their roles and were visibly engaged, though as is true for any classroom activity, participation levels varied. With that in mind, changing partners in regular intervals was important to keep the interactions fresh and focused. As the activity went on, the level of comfort and participation, dramatic input, increased noticeably over time. Compared to other activities throughout the year, the mood was much more lively. The students did ask the teacher a rare question during their role-plays, but for the vast majority of the activity the teacher was not at all busy which allowed time to observe how the role-play was proceeding. The teacher did make suggestions to students who needed reminding "parentese", body language, or other aspects of the role-play, and when there was an odd number of students, the teacher would join the activity.

The activity was successful as judged by the teacher, and the informal survey and interviews. It also appeared that students did feel they had, and indeed wanted to, master their chosen children's books, and they found the activity less threatening than other class activities.

7. Conclusions

The role-play outlined in this paper attempted to create an environment favorable for instilling a mastery goal orientation in the students; various aspects of the role-play are intended to do that: students are told during the introduction that no performance based evaluations or tests will be given based on the role-play materials or concepts, students spend ample time to master their chosen books, parent roles are modeled and referred to extensively as “all-knowing” authorities compared to the ignorant, naive, dependent, questioning child, as well as assuming authoritative parental speech and inflections. All these instill a sense in the student playing the parent role as having mastered English—the goal has been reached. Removing tests, performance standards, and allowing ample time for the students to master their children's books should ameliorate the usual negative baggage carried by language learners or learners in general: fear of failure or inhibitions associated with learning (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994, and Mohseni & Ameri, 2010).

Many issues are open for further study that should be assessed quantitatively, such as whether or not the activity did have any significant effect developing an achievement goal orientation—short or longterm. Are the role-play and teacher stressed illusions, including body language and expressions, effective at all? Though perhaps exact methods are not yet proven in detail, there are many proposed methods for creating stimulating classroom environments to foster mastery goal orientations (Ames, 1992, and Meece, Anderman & Anderman, 2006) which, along with growth mindset strategies (Dweck, 2006), merit incorporating into most any setting.

More hypothetical, and possibly more intriguing, is whether or not giving students a strong sense—though illusory as they only are mastering a couple children's books—of mastery of the target language might activate a mastery goal orientation in a counter-directional approach; not a mastery goal approach leading to mastery, rather mastery leading to a mastery goal orientation. This could also be seen as a kind of feedback loop or reinforcement for striving for mastery. Repeatedly reminding the students that they are the all-knowing parent is also an attempt to build up their role-play persona for them to get into character, which is also supported by the ignorant child they are reading to.

Though not quantified, students did appear to be more actively engaged and motivated, and did express enthusiasm for the activity. However, teachers are not in the habit of quantifying the effectiveness of every activity used in the classroom; some reliance on intuition is always part of the picture to gauge whether or not a lesson merits classroom time or should be summarily deleted. In this case, the role-play activity will be continued with an eye towards creating a more achievement and growth oriented environment.

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