

## Role-play as an independent learning technique in developing semantic & pragmatic competence

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### ABSTRACT

As students enter the Fifth year of an English Department, an increased responsibility for a lot of linguistic information is highly desirable. Students need to do many efforts to differentiate and understand of both semantics and pragmatics. Adopting lecture technique only is not enough to realize semantic and pragmatic competences. The sample of the study was 32 students in Qassim Private Colleges. The instruction took place after conducting pretest. The students did role-play followed by free discussion techniques. Results of the t. test analysis revealed that adopting role-play yielded significant effects on students' semantics and pragmatics competences.

**Keywords:** semantic competence, pragmatic competence, role-plays

### SUMMARY

This paper investigated the effectiveness of adopting Role-play as an independent learning technique in developing semantic & pragmatic competence and the changes implemented to “Semantics and pragmatics” course at English Department, College of Administrative and Human Science in Qassim Private Colleges. The students were asked to do some open and closed tasks of role-play in the classroom. A benefit of this change is that the instructor can significantly apply the concepts of semantics and pragmatics in real situations to be clear for the students. In addition, it reduces the ambiguity of the two concepts. Lecture technique for developing these two concepts was not effective. Therefore, role-play represents one of the solutions for solving this problem. Participants were 32 fifth level students in English Department from Qassim Private Colleges in Saudi Arabia. The pre-

posttest was used to determine to what extent was role- play technique was effective. Results of the t. test analysis revealed that adopting role-play technique yielded significant effects on students' semantic and pragmatics competence for the posttest results.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the study

Learning language is not only restricted to lecture or notes taking. In addition, reading a textbook and listening to lectures do not make learning meaningful. Students truly learn information that has to be meaningful to them. Language teaching is not teaching solid rules or fixed vocabulary in dictionary. It helps students to develop themselves as people (Dorathy, 2011). To master a language, a student need to develop competences. Niezgoda & Rover (2001) divided these competences into four competences as follows:



Niezgoda & Rover (2001) language Competences

Understanding language requires two main competences; semantics competence and pragmatic competence.

### Semantic competence

Semantic competence is the ability to determine the meaning of a particular string of words (Davidson D. , 1984). This string may correspond to more than one syntactic structure. Therefore, there is a kind of relationship between semantic competence and syntactic structure. These relationships include entailment, contradiction and equivalence. Semantic competence cannot be developed semantic competence alone or in isolation. One cannot memorize meanings for himself only and claims that he develops his semantic competence. It is based on interaction between people. One can build his personal competence with communicating and interacting with others. So, we could conclude that there is no semantic competence without contextual competence. The following diagram express the relationships between semantic competence, contextual competence and syntactic structure.



Figure1. semantic, Contextual and syntactic relationships

To sum up the previous figure, semantic competence consists of

- Knowing the meaning of individual lexical item. It does not require just only the meaning. What we know about the word is summarized in the following Figure;
- Knowing the structure of the sentence.
- Knowing the context in which this lexical item takes place. (Davidson D. , 1984)



Figure1. What we need to know a word

### Pragmatic competence

Pragmatics, simply, means study of meaning in context. Pragmatic competence is a critical component in the communicative spectrum due to its attention to the role of the hearer in the communicative process (Vitale, 2009). Crystal (1985: 240) defined pragmatics as:

... .. the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication."

This definition defines pragmatics from the perspective of the users. Pragmatic comprehension means comprehension of oral language, interpretation of speaker's intension, attitude, intonation and feeling to take the suitable response. It is crucial in understanding the speaker's utterance. This interpretation is based on speech act. It serves as a function in communication. John Austin (1962) was the first to design a classification system of speech act. He classified speech act into three categories;

- Locutionary: Meaning, namely, the literal meaning of the utterance.
- Illocutionary: Is related to the social function that the utterance or the written text has.
- Perlocutionary: Is the result or effect that is produced by the utterance in the given context. (Austin, 1962).

In addition, Pragmatic comprehension can be identified as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Garcia, 2004). In a study conducted by Alagozlu and Buyukozturk (2009) assured that there was no relation between linguistic knowledge and pragmatic comprehension. Depending on lecture technique only to understand both of semantic and pragmatic competence represented a problem for level four students at English department. They did not interact with the written sentences to differentiate between semantic and pragmatic.

### Assessing pragmatic competence

Hudson et al. (1995) proposed six methods to assess pragmatic competence in a foreign language context;

- Open discourse completion test (OPDCT),
- Listening lab oral production test (LL),
- Multiple-choice discourse completion test (MCDCT),
- Role-play (RP),

- Self-assessment (SA), and
- Role-play self-assessment (RSA).

As shown above, role-play technique was one of the methods that are used in assessing and mastering pragmatic competence. Therefore, there were a bad need for adopting role-play technique to go on for this course. The researcher designed this program based on role-play to develop students' semantic and pragmatic competence.

### Role -play

Richards and Rodgers (1986) examined the theoretical views of language into three main parts; structural, functional and interactional views. Role-play represents the interactional view of language. This view sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 17).

### Forms of the role-play

There are two forms of role-play with different terms. The first is closed role-plays or divergent role-plays. The students are required to represent one –turn oral response. It is specific to what will happen. The second is opened role-plays or convergent role-plays. It is not specific. It focused on what the learner will do (Tompkins, 1998).

### Merits of role-play in teaching

Joyce & Weil, 2009, assured that role-play provides a live sample of human behavior. It gives the students the chance to:

- Explore their feelings.
- Gain insights into their attitudes, values, and perceptions.
- Develop their problem-solving skills and attitudes.
- Explore subject matter in varied ways.

### Context of the Problem

Based on a pilot study conducted at the beginning of the first term 2016/2017 on the Fifth level in English department, in Qassim Private Colleges. This pilot study was based on students' backgrounds about semantics that was driven from the previous courses. This study represented the basics through which the method of the new course would be used in semantics and pragmatics course. The students did not perform well. Therefore, it was difficult as a teacher to start a new course.

### Statement of the problem

Thus, the study problem was identified in Fifth level students' poor performance in semantics and pragmatics. It was clear through the pilot study results. Therefore, the current study attempted to develop students' ability in semantic and pragmatic competence through adopting role-play technique. To reach this aim, the study tried to answer the following main question:

What is the effectiveness of adopting role-play technique in developing semantic and pragmatic course for university students?

This main question is divided into the following sub-questions:

- What are the theoretical bases of using role-play in teaching?
- What steps should be undertaken for adopting role-play in semantics and pragmatics course?

### Hypotheses of the study

There would be a statistically significant difference ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) in third-year EFL majors' listening comprehension between the pretest and the posttest in favor of the posttest.

### Objectives of the study

The present study aimed at finding answers to the following questions:

- How can the role-play technique help to develop student's semantic and pragmatic competence?
- Is there any significant difference ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) in Fifth-level EFL majors' semantic and pragmatic competence between the pretest and the posttest?

### Definition of Terms

#### Semantic Competence

It is the ability to determine the meaning of particular string of words and the relationships between the meanings of distinct syntactic structure. These relationships include entailment, equivalence, and contradiction. Semantic Competence consists of:

- Knowledge of the meaning of individual lexical items.
- Knowledge of how the syntactic structure guides the construction of sentence (and phrase-level) meaning from the meanings of individual lexical items, and of the operations by which meaning is constructed.

### *Pragmatic Competence*

Garcia, 2004, defined pragmatic competence as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures. In this study, pragmatic competence is the same as contextual competence. It refers to the interaction with other people. It represented the environment for semantic competence. Therefore, there is no semantic competence without contextual competence. Semantic competence could not be developed in isolation.

### *Role-play*

Role-play is a form of web –based learning that allow the students to apply what they learn or have learned in a controlled environment (Davis, 1993, 159). In this study, role-play is adopted in two forms; the free or open role, through which the students are free in their responses and the second, is closed role-play in which the students perform specific response.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Role-play is not just only a technique that specific to English Language Teaching, but also, it is a broad technique adopting in history, politics, medicine and science Education. (Craciun, 2010) assured that adopting role-play in science education repertoire of the future science teacher for the following reasons; it is an interesting, agreeable and motivating student in class activities. It is a better way to sketch ideas or debate them for discussion. Our related literature will be limited to adopt role-play in English language Teaching. Graves, 2009, confirmed the importance of role-play in teaching senior high school students. Lui, (2009) assured the importance of role-play in English language teaching as it adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and a lot of fun. Ghosh, (2013) identifies the probable courses in a typical construction program that can be benefitted from the adoption of role-play. Subaihi, (2015) investigates the effect of using role-play strategy on a group of female preparatory year learners of Al-Ghad College to enhance their speaking ability. The study recommended using role-play in class made learners more engaged with the lesson, negotiate with each other and help each other than they are in a traditional lecture. MA, (2013) assures that English language speakers must know many pragmatic elements in order to avoid misunderstandings during communication. Therefore, such a great usage of English language requires a pragmatic competence to

help learners in second or foreign language master communication. Rueda & Yined, (2004) design a project for their high school students to investigate the teachability of pragmatics.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A one-group pre-posttest quasi-experimental design was employed. Students were pretested on semantic and pragmatic before the treatment and then post tested after it.

### **Variables**

The study included an independent variable (the role-play technique) and dependent variable (semantic and pragmatic competences).

### **Participants**

The subjects of the study were 32 students in fifth level at Qassim Private Colleges, English Department. Students' ages ranges from 19 to 26 years old.

### **Procedures**

The experimental procedures of the present study were carried out at Qassim Private Colleges, Saudi Arabia, during the first term of the 2016/2017 academic year within the "An Introduction to semantic and pragmatic" course. These procedures were executed as follow:

The experiment would take ten 45-minutes classes. During the procedure, the students would be divided into ten groups, each one including three students.

The first five groups would be given specific topics to be acted (closed role-play). Every group of them would act their written roles. Before performing their roles, they will read their scripts. It was considered the first scene, which represented the semantic competence. Then they act their roles.it would be the second scene. , which represented the pragmatic competence. Finally, discussion would be opened about their understanding of the two scenes. Through discussion, the difference between the semantic competence and pragmatic competence would be clear for them. For the first class, teacher would take 10 minutes to explain the rules for this activity. The participants were free to divide their groups. The teacher distribute topics to each group. Each group would have 15-20 minutes to prepare and act their roles. Each group had 5 minutes to present themselves in front of the class and provided us with the setting of their play. When one group was performing, the



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others would watch and record their comments for the player's advantages and disadvantages.

After that, the last twenty minutes would be taken for discussion. The second five groups were free to act what they wanted. There were no specific topics (open role-play). They would go under the same procedures in the first group.

**Table.** Paired Samples Test

Paired Differences		t			df		Sig. (2-tailed)		
Mean		Std. Deviation			Std. Error Mean		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		Lower					Upper		
Pair 1	VAR00001 - VAR00002	50.04545	23.92130	2.94451	44.16486	55.92604	16.996	65	.000

In the present study, it was hypothesized that there would be a statistically significant difference ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) in level five students at Qassim Private Colleges between the pretest and the posttest in favor of the posttest. A paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the posttest ( $t=16.996$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). These results were in vain with the Graves, 2009, Lui, 2009, MA, and Subaihi, 2015 in assuring the importance of adopting role-play in language teaching.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the present study, the researcher concluded that the role-play technique developed students' semantic and pragmatic competences. With regard to the specific questions addressed in this research about adopting role-play technique help to develop student's semantic and pragmatic competence, we conclude that role-play technique did

- motivate students in the classroom to interact with their peers and with the instructor;
- Turn solid semantic and pragmatic rules into active content. There was no need to memorize rules, definitions about pragmatics;
- build up experience, and
- Build up self-confidence with handling the situation in real life.

In addition to that, there were two key issues lead to the successful role-play. The first is the correction policy. The teacher was more tolerant with mistakes. He did not interrupt the students' interaction. The peer correction was the main method for correction. Students accepted their peer correction. The second is the teacher's role.

However, they would arrange their role-plays themselves.

## RESULTS

Paired-samples t-test was used to test the difference between the means of scores of the students on the pretest and the posttest of semantic and pragmatic course.

Role –play is one of the best techniques that is derived from the communicative approach. The teacher, here, is a guide, facilitator and advisor. He is like the orchestra leader. He watches the role-play and offers comments and advice at the end. Sometimes, he takes part in the role-play scene for exposing pragmatic issue like speech act. There was one of the role-play suggested by one of group; it was that "I did not pay my rent". It aroused a great deal of discussion between the other students. They were active.

To sum up, adopting role-play into the classroom adds variety and clarity for definition and idioms. It brings real situations and experience to the class. The students transferred their experiences in the native language into language classes. They had fun and change theoretical information about English language into practice. In addition, introvert students took part in role-play. They were given the opportunity to express themselves not fear of the teacher. He did not represent the authority here.

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