

Role play and simulation games

Role Play

Role play can be a particularly effective way of providing practice for the participants on a business English course, and it is invariably popular. The participants may well be familiar with this approach from the business training courses they have completed. It involves the participants in taking on a role in the same way that an actor might take on a role on the stage.

For example, a participant might be given a card which says something like this:

You are the sales manager of a small firm. You receive a telephone call from an angry customer who bought a home security system from your company but is not happy with it. Ask for details of the problem. Seek clarification of the problem. Apologise and offer to repair it.

Your partner might have a card that says:

You bought a home security system but it does not work properly. The alarm goes off at odd times when people are in the house. You are quite annoyed about this because you paid a lot of money. Explain what the problem is. Ask for your money back.

The participants in role play will have a situation like this to work with and their role card will state who they are, what they want to do, and what their attitude is. If the card has been well prepared, the participants will be clear about how they should respond, although there may be some degree of choice. However, in general, the task for the participants will be to follow the instructions on the card and try to use appropriate language. Any new language should have been introduced to them at an earlier stage and already practised in other ways. What the participants will need to do will be clearly stated on their card. This is the main contrast with simulations or case studies, and we will look at these below.

It is important that the roles are clearly outlined or the participants may not be quite clear how to 'play' this particular role. The tasks the participants need to do in the role play should also be stated clearly for the same reason. They should be quite straightforward, single tasks that take no more than about 5 minutes to complete.

There are at least nine reasons why you should include role play in all of your business English courses.

1. Setting up a role-play activity often transforms the layout of the room and makes the atmosphere more relaxed and friendly.
2. The change of activity is always welcomed by participants and will help to keep your sessions lively and interesting, as well as keeping the participants alert and active.
3. Role play gives the participants the opportunity to practise the new language that they have been working on in the course.
4. The fact that the role play involves real language based on real-life data makes the activity highly relevant to the needs of the participants.
5. Role play integrates elements of the language they've been learning in the classes as well as the language that they knew before.
6. It helps to make them aware of gaps in their knowledge and the language that they need to practise / learn.
7. Role play may help to make them aware of cultural differences and how these can be important in a business environment.
8. Role play can help you to assess the progress of your participants; as they are fully involved in their activity you can observe their actions and also keep a check on their language. You can address some of the points arising from your observations in the feedback session after the role play.
9. Role play also encourages/requires participants to adopt suitable body language for the given situation and relationship between those involved in the dialogue.

What sort of role play activities would be appropriate in a business English class? Here are just a few possible examples.

1. Person A is selling advertising space in a magazine. Person B is interested, but reluctant to buy space at the price suggested. However, she is interested and is willing to negotiate.
2. Person A is the designer of a new style of cordless iron for the home and he is looking for a manufacturer; B is the managing director of a manufacturing company but is sceptical about this product.
3. A is the managing director of a small company; B is the advertising director and wants to advertise the products on television. The MD is keen on advertising in newspapers and is unconvinced about the value of television advertising (in terms of costs and returns) so B has to try to persuade the MD.
4. A sells clothes but doesn't like products made of fur. However, her company is losing money. B produces products such as short jackets, stoles, gloves and belts made of fur. B has to try to persuade A to sell his products. There are high profit margins in fur products.

Simulation Games

A simulation is similar to role play except that in a simulation the participants are free to take their own decisions and are not directed in any way by constraints laid down on a role card. For example, in a role play activity, a participant may be asked to take on the role of someone in the purchasing department who wants to buy a particular product while their partner may be asked to take on the role of someone in the marketing department who is very anxious to buy a different product. Their role play task will be to discuss their products and use persuasive language. There will be no need for them to agree on one particular product by the end of the activity as the process of talking and using persuasive language is the very purpose of the activity.

In contrast, in a simulation there are likely to be more than two participants and each will be given a role. For example, one may be the accountant and another may be the marketing manager while another may be the purchasing manager and so on. They will start off with a basic scenario; for example, they may be told that their company sells bicycles and that a new type of folding bicycle has come on the market and they need to

consider how best to take advantage of this product and make a profit. So, for example, they would have to think about what they could afford to pay for each bicycle, what the selling price would be, who would be interested, how they could market it and so on. They could take whatever decisions they wanted. They would start with a cash sum and they would have to think about how best to use that money. They will be using language they have learnt, but another aim of the simulation will also be to, for example, make as much profit as possible in the course of the game.

From time to time, the simulation 'umpire' will add additional pieces of information (higher interest rates, higher transport costs, new competitors, a successful web site and so on) which the members would have to take into account and adapt to. There would also be 'wild' cards that groups pick up from time to time and which would either be lucky or unlucky in terms of the success of that company. Many simulations involve the use of dice which can decide certain elements that impinge on a particular company or on all of the companies. For example, a group could roll a die (or two dice) to see if the weather in their area that summer was going to be good or bad. An even number might mean a poor summer while an odd number would be classified as a warm, dry summer. These are factors that are likely to have implications with regard to the sale of bicycles.

I think it's clear that although role-play tasks and simulations are 'cousins' there are also significant differences.

- Simulations involve more participants.
- They take longer than role-play activities.
- They are more suitable for more advanced learners as the language used is more advanced and complex.
- The focus is on general fluency rather than specific language functions.
- There are no constraints (i.e. on role cards) on how the participants behave. Each participant has a role (e.g. managing director) but how they act out that role is completely up to them.
- Simulations take quite a lot of preparation but if they work well they can be reused in future classes.

- The simulation can be set up so that there are 'winners' and 'losers' in terms of the amount of money that a company makes during the course of the activity.
- Because of the competitive nature of the simulation, simulations are invariably popular with the participants and they get intensely involved in them as the activity progresses.

English Training Centre