Language teaching through role-play:
A Hungarian view

Magdolna Halápi
University of Budapest
Danny Saunders
University of Glamorgan

This article explores the introduction of new teacher training methods at the Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT) at the University of Budapest, along with its partner schools. A particular interest has emerged in the use of role-play to make language learning more student centered and interactive, thereby creating a more spontaneous and realistic learning environment that prepares teacher trainees and their students for social interaction via the medium of a foreign language. The article concludes with a summary of main findings about the perception of role-play activity based on in-depth interviews with 10 trainee teachers linked with the CETT program.

The Hungarian context

Language learning in Hungarian schools has changed radically during the past two decades due to significant shifts in national policy (Enyedi & Medgyes, 1998; Gazsó, 1997; Muvelodési és Közoktatási Minisztérium, 1988-1996). Russian used to be a compulsory subject, but it has now been overtaken by English and German, leading to a shortage of competent language teachers in Hungarian schools (Medgyes & Malderez, 1996).

To ease the tension between supply and demand, the Hungarian government launched two educational programs. The Russian Retraining Programme trains Russian teachers to become qualified teachers of another foreign language, mostly English or German. The outcome of the program is doubtful. As Enyedi and Medgyes (1998) stated, these teachers are forced to become teachers of a new language past middle age. They are often fighting the shock of becoming redundant and in the meantime working full-time as unqualified teachers of the new language.

The other remedy the government introduced in 1990 was the fast-track teacher training programs in English and German. These 3-year programs were in the enviable position of not having traditions, so they were free to set up their own philosophy and practices. They could therefore build on the latest results of applied linguistics and language pedagogy. At the same time, they had to notice that they were challenging many

preconceptions within those traditional universities that hosted them. These ranged from questioning theoretical assumptions about education to choosing alternative methods and systems for language learning.

The Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT) within the Eotvos Lorand University of Budapest has been running such a 3-year program since 1990. The program concentrates on professional training, with the methodology-related courses taking up roughly 50% of the curriculum, besides language improvement, linguistics, and literature courses. The biggest difference between the traditional 5-year program and CETT lies in the amount of teaching practice. CETT students complete between 100 and 200 hours of teaching experience, whereas traditional programs provide about 15 hours. Feedback received from schools has been very favorable toward the teaching skills of CETT graduates (Ryan, 1999).

One of the fast-track 3-year programs at CETT Budapest, together with other teacher training institutions and schools in Hungary, operates with the aim of educating students in English lessons through practice in finding and using information in the solution of real problems (Claxton, 1989). This is in marked contrast to swallowing, memorizing, and reproducing information in the EFL classroom. The students acquire skills because teachers are not merely information givers but are instead dedicated to the facilitation of a more global process. This involves developing intellectual and language skills, problem solving, awareness raising about learning and language, and cooperation and tolerance toward different cultures and values.

Traditional Hungarian education, therefore, needs the opportunity of foreign language classrooms where students learn other social skills as well (van Ek & Trim, 1990). Examples include how to get to know and accept each other, exchange ideas, negotiate opinions, come to agreements, or express disagreement. The EFL classroom has an incredible educational potential in this respect, which also leads to social and cultural change in Hungarian society.

The embedding of transferable skills (Saunders, 1984) within the EFL curriculum leads to the professional development of students who are reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983)—learners who are already experienced teachers when they start their career and look upon their practice as continuous professional development.

This new generation of students is completing its teaching experience in 30 practice schools in Budapest with the professional guidance of trained school-based mentor teachers and university trainers.

Interactive teaching in
Hungarian secondary schools?

The teaching of foreign languages (EFL in particular) has a long history in pioneering student center learning (Gardner, 1985). This has included paired learning methods, small-group work, completing projects, using interactive handouts, peer tutoring, student exchanges, and student placements within the workplace. At the heart of EFL

teaching is a dedication to learning outcomes and developing innovative pathways to those outcomes through the use of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies (Habershaw & Gibbs, 1993; Race, 2001). The result is an emphasis on output and student achievement rather than input and covering a syllabus. One great advantage involves a flexibility in being able to choose teaching materials and in designing new activities. This is where simulation gaming offers much potential, and it is within this broad application that role-play is especially valued by ELT teachers. As noted by such theorists and practitioners as Jones (1995) and van Ments (1989), role-play allows students to step into other people's shoes and see the world from their point of view through speaking and understanding a different language.

In Hungary, and with the exception of Matheidesz (1988), little research has been conducted into teachers' use of role-play or simulation games in their teaching practice. This tradition was broken by Fekete, Major, and Nikolov (1999), who found that out of 118 English lessons observed for oral and written activities, in only 27 were role-play activities observed. There was no mention of any activity that could be called a simulation game. The schools where classes were observed included those in Budapest (16%, other cities 56%, and small towns 28%). It is emphasized that this finding does not reflect a rejection of role-play as educationally invalid. Instead, it reflects a legacy of formal lecture-style instruction within Hungarian schools and a traditional approach to teaching that rules out interactive learning methods. In other words, many Hungarian teachers have never tried to use role-play techniques or materials.

Both teachers and students used the mother tongue excessively. The traditional teaching methods prevailed in spite of the fact that interactive coursebooks were used in every class. The most frequent oral task types were translation, reading aloud, and grammar drills. It is interesting to note how these established and conventional teachers explained the inevitable lack of motivation and boredom of their students. Fekete et al. (1999) noted that most of them laid the blame on their students for not participating actively in the lessons. Teachers were unaware of their responsibilities in forming students' favorable attitudes toward language learning. One of the important conclusions of the research emphasized the responsibility of the teacher training institutions for implementing in-service training (and not just initial teacher training at the start of teaching careers) to improve teachers' language proficiency and language awareness in the use of a variety of methodologies—especially role-play and simulation gaming.

The Classroom Observation Project (Nikolov, 1999) was one of eight baseline projects reported by Fekete et al. (1999). It gave an insight into average and disadvantaged secondary schools, pedagogical processes, and task types that teachers used in the past 3 years of secondary education (years 10, 11, and 12) to make sure that the tasks and levels are realistically set for the new examinations. Classrooms were investigated in nonprestigious schools in mostly disadvantaged geographic areas. Data from 118 classes in 55 secondary schools were collected and analyzed. One third of the classes were in nonspecialized grammar schools and two thirds in vocational schools. Three quarters of the schools were situated in big towns and a quarter were in smaller towns. The data collection method was classroom observation, structured interviews with the

teachers after the observed classes, and teachers' self-reports (using the same checklist as the observers during the class). The observation instruments (observation sheets, checklists of task types and techniques, interview questions) were designed by a base-line team. The data collection was carried out by nine teachers.

The following findings reveal to what extent various teaching and learning methods are present in state secondary schools:

- Frontal, group, pair, and individual work were observed, although the rate of frontal work on average was more than twice as much as the time devoted to group- and pairwork activities. In general, most of the classes were teacher fronted, although group- and pairwork have gained some ground in teachers' practices.
- For teachers' use of the first and the target language, about 70% of teachers' speech was English. Considering that teachers are almost the exclusive source of the target language for students, this high (30%) rate of mother-tongue use seems to be against students' interest. Observers noted that teachers used Hungarian mostly for two reasons: to explain grammar and vocabulary and to translate their own explanations and instructions into Hungarian.
- Most observed tasks aimed at developing grammar and speaking skills; least frequently, tasks developing writing and listening skills were observed. The ranking order starting from the area getting the most emphasis was speaking, grammar, reading, translation, integrated, vocabulary, listening, and writing.
- On average, two oral tasks were used in one class, which shows that students did not get much chance to talk. This and the fact that a lot of Hungarian is used indicate that limited oral practice is occurring. The most frequent oral tasks are answering questions and discussion prompted by pictures.
- The writing tasks most frequently reported were language-focused ones. The observation results show that copying was the most frequently used task type; translation and gap-filling also figures high on the list. The other most frequently used tasks were substitution drills and other sentence-level tasks. They reflect the grammar-translation and audio-lingual traditions and are typical testing techniques in school-leaving and proficiency exams. Writing and speech performance usually remained at the one-word or sentence level. More creative, lifelike tasks (writing short memos, notes, or diary entries; completing forms, questionnaires, or filling out data; writing texts with a given beginning or ending or with some kind of guidance; writing formal or informal letters and invitations; or writing instructions or giving directions) were rarely observed, and there was no postcard or greeting card writing task observed at all.
- Listening comprehension tasks were least used. Observers also noted that teachers did not exploit classroom language for management as a way of improving students' listening comprehension. In sum, listening seemed to be the most neglected skill in the observed groups.
- Among reading comprehension tasks, reading aloud was the most frequent task type. It was often combined with translation to check comprehension. The next most frequently used task type was matching pictures to text and occasionally arranging a narrative sequence of events or stages. Matching sentences or phrases to gaps in a text, multiple matching, sequencing sentences or paragraphs to form a text, multiple choice, and matching headings and headlines to texts were also found.
- The observers described the classrooms as unfriendly facilities where equipment was underused, there was little displayed student work, and in most classes students were seated in traditional rows. Observers found most teachers to be overworked, underpaid, and disillusioned.

- The majority of the observed teachers were not aware of how classroom activities and teachers' morale could contribute to the development of students' motivation and blamed mostly the students for failures.

Future optimism

As noted by Kolb (1984), learning often follows a cycle wherein experience is followed by observation and reflection leading to experimentation based on abstract conceptualization. This in turn leads to new experience. Garcia-Carbonell, Rising, Montero, and Watts (2001) emphasized the relevance of such experiential learning to language learning, which is encouraged through role-play. Drawing on the work of Jones (1995), they observed a distinctive characteristic that sets role-play apart from simulation: playing a part—usually before an audience—with participants inventing much of the scenario. Foreign language teachers value role-play because of the inclusion of authentic communication linked with adopting to new situations while in relatively low-risk environments (Saunders & Crookall, 1985). At the heart of such communication lies conversation inspired by problem-solving tasks (Nunan, 1989) within low-anxiety environments (Gardner, 1985).

These are the key educational assumptions underlying the development of CETT practice schools in Budapest, where the trainee teachers in their final year are completing their teaching practice.

School mentors, trained through CETT in-service courses, assist the trainee students' teaching experience during the whole school year. These are classrooms where interactive communication as the basis for successful learning-based teaching is being practiced and where motivating students is a top priority. English is the language of the classroom, and skills development involves all language skills. British textbooks (that are far from being perfect for the local needs) are used for source material, which is then embellished for more effective learning through the use of various techniques, task types, and management procedures. Before starting their teaching experience, CETT trainees complete a two-semester methodology seminar course to develop their understanding of the principles of language learning and teaching. They also complete a classroom studies course introducing real teaching dilemmas through school visits and classroom observation. In the 3rd year (along with teaching practice), they attend a lecture series on theories of language learning and teaching, along with a classroom studies seminar course providing additional peer support for the personal development of trainees as reflective practitioners (Moon, 1999). The classroom studies tutor also regularly visits the trainees' classes.

Method

As a CETT trainer, the first author has been involved in the 3rd-year classroom studies course for 4 years and has observed trainees' and mentors' classes in different

practice schools. The present research was carried out in the past academic year with the aim of getting deeper insight into trainee teachers' experiences in using role-play activities for English language learning. Ten inexperienced teachers were interviewed (a participation rate of 66%, because 15 were approached in total). Of these individuals, 8 were completing their teaching experience in the practice schools, and 2 were recent CETT graduates who continued on to postgraduate studies at the master's level.

The semistructured interview as a tool was chosen to encourage detailed qualitative comments through professional discussion, in addition to getting answers to preprepared questions. The interview involved questions about the trainees' use of activities that fall into the category of role-play as defined by Porter Ladousee (1987) and van Ments (1989), wherein students play a part in a specific situation and an experimental but safe environment. In such an activity, learners create their own world, explore the use of another language, and practice interacting with each other, but with none of the risks of real-life communication and potential conflict. Each trainee was asked the following questions:

- Have you used role-plays in your classrooms? How many times?
- Do you think your students benefit from these activities? If yes, how?
- What kind of difficulties did you experience when using role-play?
- Do you design role-play activities yourself?

The interviews were conducted in the period of 3 weeks and lasted about 20 minutes on average. All interviews were taped and the results analyzed.

Results

Although the interviews reflect only a few trainees' experiences, they reveal certain aspects that are worth considering for language teaching more generally.

A key question explored whether interviewees considered role-play useful, and the extent to which their students benefited from them. The following answers were recorded:

- Although simulated activity is involved, it is nevertheless close to real-life communication where students are trying to achieve a goal which is beyond the language; the language is only the means to the end.
- Students learn to cooperate and negotiate while working on the task; they also gain self-confidence.
- Role-plays are excellent for developing fluency and spontaneity.
- If prepared carefully, these tasks are highly motivating and reveal students' creativity—often to the surprise of their teachers.
- Role-play is one of the most complex activities: Students have to consider structures, vocabulary, functions, and social relationships in order to use language successfully.
- The students were more motivated, showed more personal involvement, and produced bigger chunks of foreign language when the teacher chose topics that met their interest.
- Role-play activities were found especially motivating for those students who were generally risk takers and liked to experiment with the language.

- Role-play activities are a big help with mixed-level groups; weaker students are exposed to better language samples from stronger students and, at the same time, can play safely a small part in the activity.

When discussing what difficulties they had when using role-play, the interviewees identified a wide range of possible pitfalls. Some of these could be attributed to their lack of experience, whereas others challenged experienced teachers as well as trainees:

- The teacher has to pay attention to so many things at the same time when preparing and carrying out the activity that something will definitely go unnoticed, leading to difficulties later on.
- A lot of students complained that "we are not learning just playing." It proved to be difficult for teachers to explain the underlying educational rationale to students, presumably because in Hungarian schools students are used to teacher-fronted activities.
- The majority of students expressed their need for error correction; after the activity, follow-up language work was therefore appreciated.
- On the first occasions when role-play was used, most students preferred the teacher to have very low visibility as an observer.
- Shy students often failed to participate when substantial parts were assigned to them.
- Some teachers got into difficult situations as they had not had information about their students' lives and sensitivities (e.g., divorce, parent's death, financial difficulties).
- Some role-play activities fell flat when the teacher asked students to act a role in front of the whole class too early, at a time when participants are low in confidence.
- Students were likely to switch into their mother tongue when the instructions, role cards, or procedures were not clear. The same happened when the task was too ambitious: The students did not have the necessary language at their disposal that would have enabled them to use the language in the given situation.

Other replies and comments were as follows:

- All trainees have already used role-play activities several times, which means that they do not hesitate to try them out in practice when they think they are suitable.
- All of the respondents expressed the opinion that role-plays, in spite of the difficulties, are an essential part of the English language teaching classroom. Furthermore, the ability to introduce, manage, debrief, and even design role-play activities is a core professional skill associated with EFL teaching.
- No role-play activity was longer than the 45-minute class time. Most activities took up only part of the lesson. All the trainees claimed that longer, more complex activities or simulations are very difficult to use in the school context, where sometimes after Monday the next class is on [for example] Thursday.
- The role-plays that were used varied not only in length but, naturally, in their teaching aims, management, necessary preparation, and posttask discussion.
- The preparation is so time-consuming that trainees do not foresee themselves using more complex activities in the future. It was especially difficult to anticipate precise role-play and debriefing time allocations because of the diversity in discussion and interaction whenever pupils engaged in such activity.
- The sources of role-play exercises were in most cases from course texts. Most course books include role-play activities in or after certain units to practice functions and vocabulary, with preparation and implementation notes for the teacher in the teacher's edition. The trainees found these activities useful, motivating for the students, and easy to prepare. The second most popular source was the role-play they had been introduced to in

their language improvement or methodology classes at the university. The trainees found these activities more motivating for themselves than the course book activities, but they had to adapt them to their students' level and needs. The third source was the resource books that contain interactive tasks. The interviewed students claimed that they had been introduced to them throughout their language pedagogy-related courses or by their mentors. They claimed that they were planning to rely on them when planning communication tasks but also expressed strong interest in preparing their own role-plays in the future.

Final words

The interviews very clearly demonstrate that the trainees have deep interest in their students and their own teaching and are able to reflect on their practice with mature professionalism. The replies and the comments reveal that a new generation of teachers is able to reach advanced levels of interactive competence. It has to be mentioned here that the respondents were not chosen at random; those interviewed showed interest in the topic and were willing to sacrifice their time for this purpose. This might suggest that the above attitudes and opinions only reflect the practice of some highly motivated trainees, akin to some aspects of the legendary Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger & Dixon, 1939).

None of the trainees mentioned an important but problematic aspect of using role-plays. Such activities enhance developing language skills and express social relationships and appropriate behavior in different social situations. This factor might be true of second-language classes where the native speaker teacher is able to deal with the sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects as well. In Hungary, this is the least developed area of teachers' language and, naturally, if teachers are not confident, they will not be able to teach this aspect of the language to their students. Teachers and students have to be able to express different degrees of formality and informality. They have to be capable of sending appropriate messages in a given situation according to the purpose and the social or professional status of the participants. Course books should therefore contain much more targeted written and audio materials in the area of developing sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence.

In this article an attempt has been made to give an overview of the English language teaching situation and its background in Hungary, with special emphasis on ways of approaching more communicative teaching in secondary schools. The fact that CETT Budapest and other teacher training institutions have not brought about more perceptible changes in primary and secondary English language teaching through their more progressive pre- and in-service training methods and practices is perhaps due to unfavorable economic, social, and political influences. The pace of change will not speed up as long as teacher morale is low, especially because of the low prestige and miserable salaries. This is a possible reason for why the performances and the actors in this small theater are sometimes disappointing for their audiences.

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Magdolna Halápi is a teacher trainer of the Centre for English Teacher Training at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest. She is teaching language skills development and methodology courses. Her professional activities involve testing and examination development and educational management. Her research interests focus on teaching and testing writing in the EFL classroom.

Danny Saunders is the professor and head of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Glamorgan. His doctoral research was on applications of simulation gaming to higher educational innovation. He organised the UK-based SAGSET 1987 and SAGSET 1999 conferences, and edited seven editions of the International Simulation and Gaming Research Yearbook *(London: Kogan Page). His research interests lie in widening access to higher education.*

ADDRESSES: MH: Centre for English Teacher Training, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, H-1146 Ajtósi D. sor 19-21, Hungary; telephone: +36 13215947; e-mail: magdi@isis.elte.hu. DS: Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Glamorgan, Wales, CF37 1DL, UK; telephone: +44 (0)1443 480480; fax: +44 (0)1443 482931; e-mail: dmsaunde@glam.ac.uk.