

Engaging the Brain for Lifelong Learning: Skits and Role-Plays in TESOL

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This paper summarizes the author's contribution to the presentation "The Classes They Remember: Skits, Role-Plays, and the Brain's Secrets" at the Tokyo English Language Teaching Convention, presented as part of the JALT - Lifelong Learning SIG session. The presentation explored the neuroscience behind role-play and skits in language learning, emphasizing their role in fostering autonomy, engagement, and long-term retention. The event took place at the Tokyo English Language Teaching Convention, featuring contributions from educators and researchers, including Sachiko Nakagome, Jeffrey L. McEntire, Jorge L. Ulloa, Mary Nobuoka, Hilda Terauchi, Tammy Dang-Le, Sam Alatit, Yuna Imasaka, Leander S. Hughes, Nena Nikolic-Hosonaka, Peter Lackner, Midori Nakajima, Mike Russell, Samuel Koranteng, and many others.

Introduction

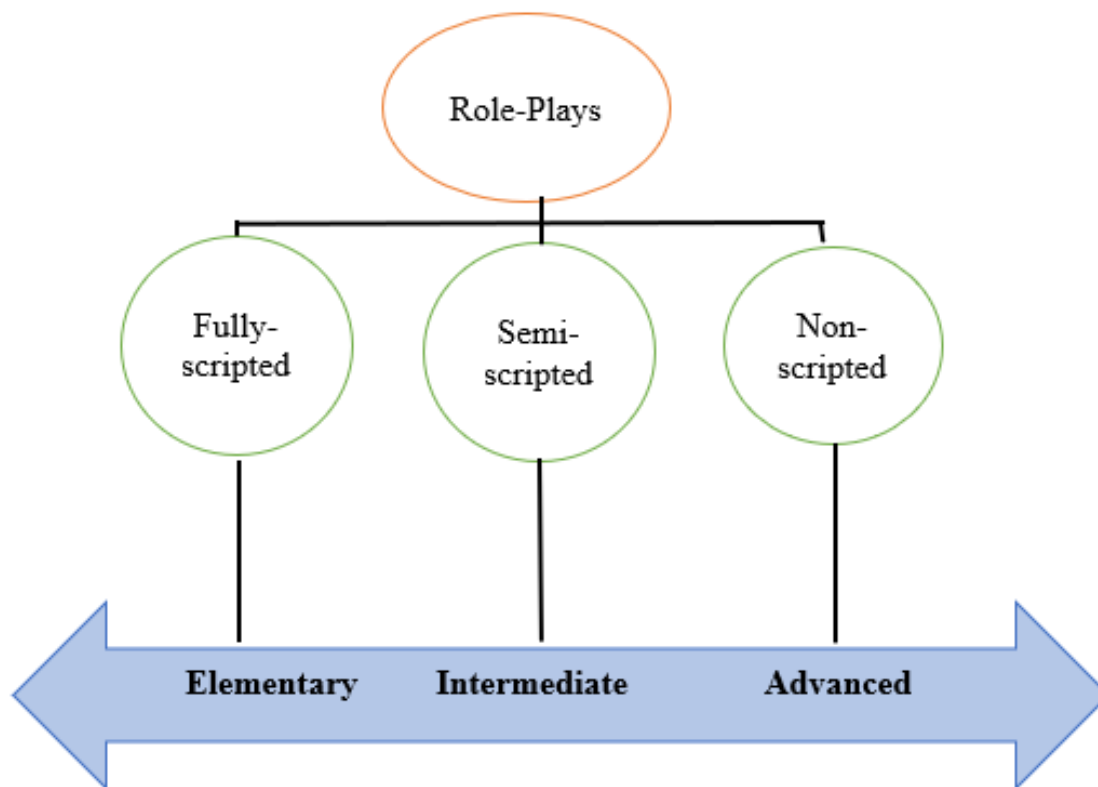
The rapid evolution of the world towards the new era of information and digitalization, where boundaries are fading because of interconnectedness, makes English an important language for enhancing communication and interactions. Future generations, especially those in areas where English is a foreign language, require a proper mastery of it to meet the difficulties of the current century. Unfortunately, many students leave school without excellent English language skills - despite Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) being part of the curriculum - due to ineffective pedagogical methods (Madua, 2022). From a neuroscientific approach to TESOL, Khari and Kelly (2021) explain that drama-based teaching and learning methods are effective in enhancing the interest of students and their mastery of English communication skills. Role-plays and skits are among the most effective approaches, which teachers should adopt to facilitate the learning of English as a second

language (ESL). In preparing for skits and role-plays in TESOL settings to assist students from diverse cultural settings, the priority is to enhance task-based learning, global citizenship education, and lifelong learning, while leveraging neuroscientific and psychobiological explanations of these drama-based methods.

Preparing for Skits and Role-Plays

Preparation for skits and role-plays involves effective collaboration to ensure that the learning or teaching process is smooth. Ladousse (1987) summarizes some of the activities during the preparation for role-plays and skits, including the collaborative determination of learning goals and expectations, and the assignment of roles for students to fulfill during these drama-based methods. First, it is necessary to choose the most suitable type of role-play or skit based on students' level of English language proficiency. Figure 1 below illustrates different types of role-plays when they should be used depending on English proficiency levels. Ly (2024) further explains that scripted role-plays require students to memorize or understand roles, while semi-structured ones involve students creating their own conversations depending on a model with blanks to fill in using relevant words, which fits intermediate learners. However, the non-scripted role-plays, ideal for intermediate to advanced learners, involve providing keywords for students to act out scenarios depending on their own understanding and opinion (Ly, 2024). In choosing the type of role-play, teachers in TESOL settings should ensure that students benefit the most in acquiring and improving English language skills.

Figure 1. Role-plays and the suitable English proficiency level



First, teachers and students should define the ground rules of the role-plays or skits, including the identification of disruptions and possible measures to mitigate them. For example, they should distinguish between chaos and noise, followed by pairing the students for one-to-one communication during role-plays (Ladousse, 1987). The pairing or grouping of learners should be influenced by the goals and expectations of role-plays or skits, which need to be clear for both a teacher and ESL students. Social learning through drama-based activities is a priority in planning ESL learning sessions, where students assigned role-play tasks are required to use their social skills, empathy, and emotions to enhance communication, while stimulating the social brain (Madua, 2022). In addition, the skits and role-plays should be appropriate for students to enhance neuroplasticity and encourage adaptation to new scenarios during drama-based learning. Thus, the teacher should plan role-plays and skits in ways that trigger appropriate emotions during socialization to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Next, the teacher should identify available resources for use in facilitating the TESOL process. According to Khari and Kelly (2021), learning should involve using the brain and engaging the musculoskeletal system through drama-based activities so as to build cause-and-effect models for learning. In learning ESL, embodied cognition is anchored on the idea that the body influences the mind (Khari and Kelly, 2021). This cognition can be enhanced through simulative or drama-based activities, where both the mind and the body of learners are stimulated to learn ESL. Since learning can be physical through drama-based activities, Zull (2002) explains that embodied cognition should be a priority to enhance neuroplasticity in teaching through simulations or other active pedagogical methods. As such, preparation for skits and role-plays should prioritize having the necessary resources for the drama-based methods, where cognition and motor activities are encouraged through total physical response involving language coordination and physical movement.

Lastly, preparing for skits and role-plays should involve sequencing drama-based activities in ways that foster prediction processing during simulations. Ochsner and Barrett (2001) explain that learning activities should encourage behaviors or practices, which involve repeating and rewarding desired practices to support the execution of habitual behaviors by associating them with a sequence of actions or thoughts. An assessment should be performed to guarantee that the drama-based activity induces pleasurable emotions after drawing attention to the activity (Madua, 2022). Consequently, predictive processing is enhanced by the teacher preparing students' brains to the anticipated information, pleasurable emotions, movements, and decisions during role-plays and skits.

Comparison and Implications

Although skits differ from role-plays, they have similar implications for teaching and learning in TESOL settings. Ly (2024) defines role-plays as activities in which learners are assigned tasks or roles in an

improvised scene based on available clues of information. In turn, Ladousse (1987) states that role-plays involve students taking on the role of another person or their own before acting out a scenario, which depicts the aspect of practicing skills or understanding scenarios by performing the assigned roles. Conversely, skits are short comic performances with storylines. Ly (2024) further posits that role-plays are unique, because they are flexible and improvable. Since skits are structured with scripts, they can better suit students with lower levels of language proficiency during TESOL. According to Ly (2024), semi-scripted or non-scripted role-plays fit students with intermediate or advanced levels of language proficiency, because they encourage flexibility and freedom to create and understand their own conversations. This feature is contrary with the more structured of skits, where students are at the elementary level of language proficiency, since learning ESL involves memorizing and understanding assigned tasks or roles from given words.

Further, skits and role-plays have significant implications, which teachers can leverage to assist students from diverse cultural backgrounds to understand English culture. Khari and Kelly (2021) explain that skits and role-plays can provide students with dramatic learning opportunities linked with participating in assigned roles, mirroring career-related scenarios and English cultural practices. Ladousse (1987) adds that role-plays prepare students to learn English along with specific roles in their lives. As such, skits and role-plays allow learners to experiment and practice English, the language they will use in real life to interact with colleagues in school and beyond. Moreover, role-plays have significant mental implications due to the multisensorial engagement involved, enhancing knowledge retention by explaining diverse ways of learning content, including vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, especially in students from diverse backgrounds (Madua, 2022). The multisensorial approach to learning activates different brain parts and enhances language processing, while fostering understanding of various English cultures via engaging in culture-centered role plays.

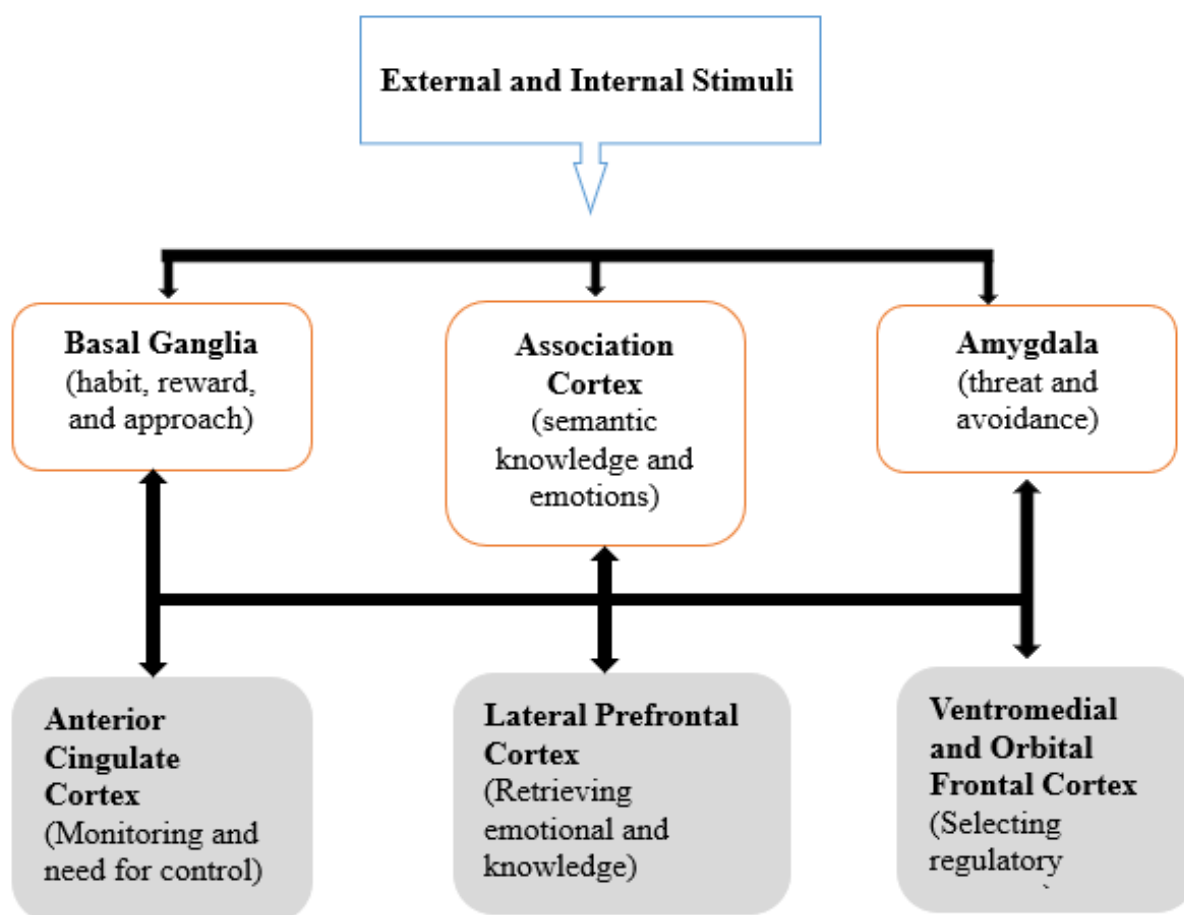
Connections to Broader Concepts

Skits and role-plays in TESOL settings closely relate to the concepts of task-based learning, global citizenship education, and lifelong learning. Ladousse (1987) explains that in role-plays, students are assigned roles or tasks involving communication and performance of specific activities in improvised scenarios, which is a critical aspect of task-based learning. The social constructivism framework of learning is also captured in lifelong learning, which entails acquiring social skills when interacting with peers during role-plays and skits. Ladousse (1987) states that drama-based learning and teaching methods provide an opportunity for peers to interact and offer feedback, thus motivating language learning. This motivation is better explained by the neural mechanisms involving the brain. Madua (2022) adds that with role-plays, students enhance their social interactions, especially when activity scenarios trigger pleasurable emotions associated with the release of dopamine. This pleasure inspires them to continue performing tasks in skits, role-plays, or real-life situations associated with the increased secretion of dopamine. As a result, the tendency to perfect the skills and perform the tasks inducing pleasurable memory increases.

Furthermore, skits and role-plays foster lifelong learning, especially when perceived from the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) framework. With continued exposure to external and internal stimuli, the brain sustains its neuroplasticity status to ensure continuous learning (Ochsner & Barrett, 2001). Using the CPH framework, Madua (2022) explains that the brain can learn new information until old age through exposure to stimuli because of its neuroplasticity to change and adapt to experiences and the environment. Figure 2 illustrates the ways in which the brain is influenced by external and internal stimuli, reinforcing neuroplasticity and facilitating learning through drama-based techniques. Teachers can harness this potential by incorporating skits and role-plays into TESOL, ensuring that students' brains remain engaged through emotionally and cognitively

stimulating activities. When these activities generate pleasurable stimuli, students are more likely to continue engaging with English both inside and outside the classroom.

Figure 2. Lifelong learning involving brain regions exposed to internal and external stimuli from skits, role-plays, and real-life situations



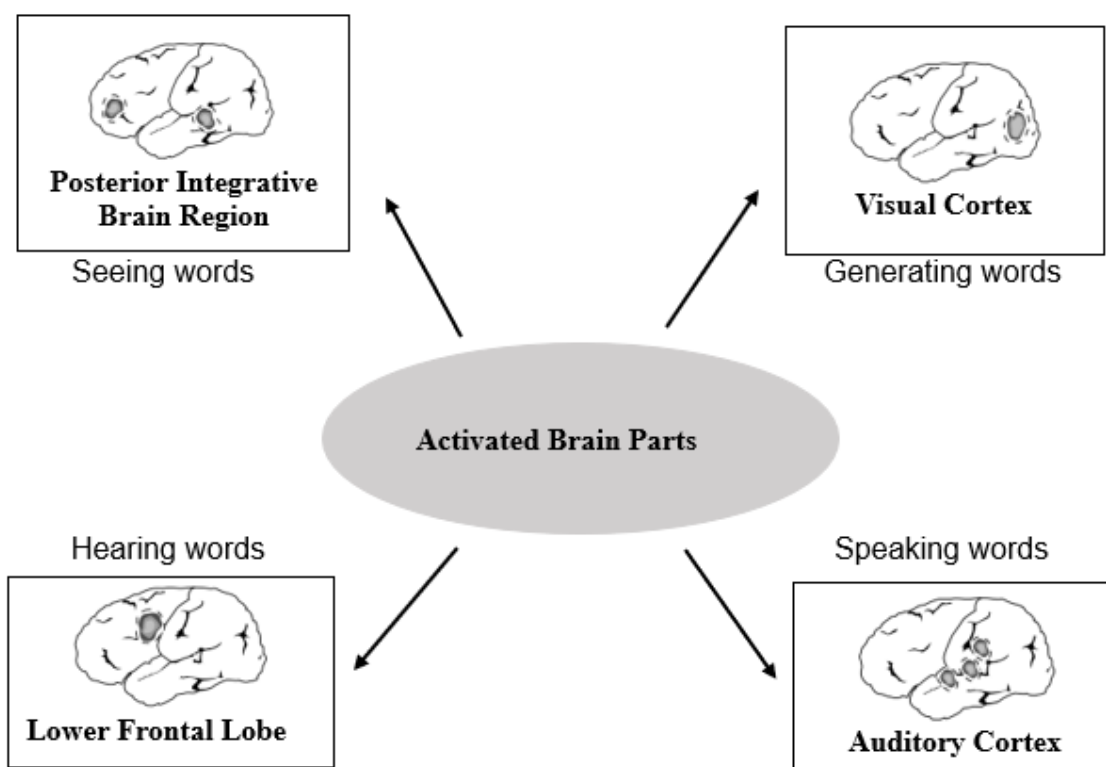
Additionally, skits and role-plays are appropriate methods of facilitating global citizenship education, promoting cross-cultural communication and civic engagement. According to Ladousse (1987), the acquisition of communication skills allows students to learn to interact with each other. Ochsner and Barrett (2001) further explain that pleasurable emotional learning experiences expose students to situations of mastering complex and simple social cues, thus guide appropriate behaviors for everyday life. The acquisition of social and

communication skills is necessary to foster civil responsibility and create cultural awareness, which are essential aspects of global citizenship. By adopting alternatives to passive traditional pedagogical approaches, emphasis is placed on social interaction in learning through methods that foster social skill acquisition and increased awareness of others' emotions and behaviors (Zull, 2002). Madua (2022) also posits that social learning, which entails the framework of social constructivism, involves obtaining social skills and knowledge through interactions with others. This framework of social constructivism is adequately enforced through skits and role-plays, where the learning of ESL happens through interactive drama-based activities.

Role of Neuroscience and Drama in Teaching

As a part of drama-based methods for TESOL, role-plays or skits are effective in teaching, because they constitute a balanced pedagogical approach that stimulates the necessary areas of the brain to facilitate learning ESL. The images in Figure 3 below demonstrate active brain areas when creating, speaking, hearing, and seeing words, leading to a balanced approach to learning from a neuroscience perspective. Hearing and seeing words and images activate the auditory and visual cortex, while the generation of words as a mental process triggers the integrative brain region in preparation to facilitate speaking, which engages the lower frontal lobe (Zull, 2002). However, the actual speaking of words activates the motor cortex region tasked with the responsibility of driving muscle contractions required in a speech. Fundamentally, the skits or role-plays optimize the activation of all areas of the brain involved in learning ESL by encouraging a balanced approach to reflection, experience, abstraction, and active testing of the learning cycle (Zull, 2002). Thus, drama-based methods are effective in providing a balanced, holistic approach to learning ESL.

Figure 3. Brain processing of words during skits and role-plays



Additionally, skits and role-plays are effective in teaching, because they are active pedagogical methods, which effectively combine theory and practice. Ladousse (1987) explains that role-plays belong to language learning techniques with low input but high output since the teacher-centered presentation of lessons is short to allow students to practice language learning. After the brief introduction of language lessons, students immerse themselves in skit or role-play activities to learn ESL. Two ways that Ladousse (1987) suggests being effective in language teaching or learning using role-plays or skits are talking to students using the language they know or practicing functions or structures presented to them at earlier stages of language lessons. In the first situation, students gain awareness of a specific language based on what they already know to generate more knowledge through role plays, because they are rooted in meaningful contexts. However, the second situation involves active learning, where students are allowed to use the new language

presented to them during role-plays or skits. This mix of theory at the start of the ESL lesson and practice during drama-based activities ensures active learning to optimize knowledge acquisition and retention.

The role of drama-based methods, including skits and role-plays is backed by psychobiological and neuroscientific explanations. Thus, according to Ochsner and Barrett (2001), stimulus can reach the amygdala in the brain through two major ways, including the cortically-based systems recognizing stimuli through distinct perceptual features, or direct connections with sensory organs, such as the eyes, via the thalamus. The reception of sensory stimuli bypasses the longer cortical route (Ochsner & Barrett, 2001). Once the amygdala is activated by stimuli from drama-based methods, pleasurable emotions are induced. The stimuli trigger pleasurable emotions and attention during the process of learning by stimulating the amygdala to release the dopamine neurotransmitter (Attard & Frendo, 2022). This dopamine then increases motivation to seek out and approach a specific outcome because of rewards or pleasure induced by environmental stimuli (Ochsner & Barrett, 2001). According to Attard and Frendo (2022), the neural circuit secretion of dopamine increases the motivation of an individual to continue learning and master what is being taught due to the desire to sustain the associated pleasure. Thus, skits and role-plays linked with pleasurable emotions are effective in TESOL because of the motivation they give students to learn ESL.

Conclusion

Skits and role-plays are essential active learning strategies, which teachers and students should embrace in TESOL settings. Preparation for these drama-based methods requires planning to ensure their success and foster empathy, pleasurable emotions, the social brain, and embodied cognition. Their use should capitalize on the neuroplasticity and prediction processing of the brain during

simulations. Teachers are encouraged to integrate these drama-based pedagogical methods to allow students to engage in English cultures, especially if they are from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, they need to use these methods to provide students with learning opportunities to gain skills and knowledge of the tasks or responsibilities they wish to fulfill in their careers. When used appropriately, the skits and role-plays facilitate social skill learning and behavior improvement, thus fostering social citizenship. Additionally, students can learn by executing specific tasks in role-plays. Apart from task-based learning, both students and teachers should embrace these pedagogical methods to ensure lifelong learning. The effectiveness of drama in teaching ESL must be adequately unearthed through psychobiological and neuroscientific explanations, with the brain involvement in motivating pleasurable experiences and stimuli.

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