FOUR THEORIES JUSTIFYING THE USE OF DRAMA TECHNIQUES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: This article presents a part of a larger research, namely a few important theories justifying the use of drama techniques in language teaching. These theories are the following: experiential learning, Csíkszentmihalyi's flow-theory, constructivist pedagogy and Goffman's theory about the presentation of self in everyday life and the interrelations and connections between playing roles on the stage and in everyday life. A part of a needs analysis is also presented confirming the arguments from the above mentioned theories regarding the usefulness and importance of drama techniques – learning by doing and playing - used in language teaching.

Keywords: drama techniques, role-plays, language teaching, interdisciplinarity, needs analysis

Introduction

This study is part of a larger research where we tried to find answers to questions referring to two main problem areas. The first refers to the connections linking the domain of theatre and drama to the domain of language teaching. Why have some actor training techniques become so popular and adaptable in the domains of education, personality development, or psychotherapy? Why is theatre the source to which language teachers – and teachers of many other subjects – so often turn for new ideas and methods? Which are those interdisciplinary connections among the domains of theatre, pedagogy, psychology, sociology and philosophy, which make such influences possible? The second problem refers to the presence and use of drama techniques in teaching English for specific purposes, where the students are mainly adults, not children. Would drama techniques be considered helpful in preparing them for specific communicative situations and various roles that they can encounter in their profession? Do they think that such activities might help them to improve their communication skills in the target language?

A part of this research is presented in this study: four important theories are discussed, which, in our opinion, support and justify the use of *role-plays (drama techniques)* in language teaching. These theories are the following: experiential learning (life-long learning based on experience), Csikszentmihalyi's (2001) *flow*-theory (and the connection between the peak experience and the learning process), constructivist pedagogy and constructive drama, and Goffman's (1999) theory about the presentation of self in everyday life (and the interrelations and connections between playing roles on the stage and in everyday life). Some of the results of a needs analysis are also presented, confirming the arguments from the above mentioned theories regarding the usefulness and importance of drama techniques – learning by doing and playing - used in teaching English for specific purposes.

Experiential learning - life-long learning based on experience

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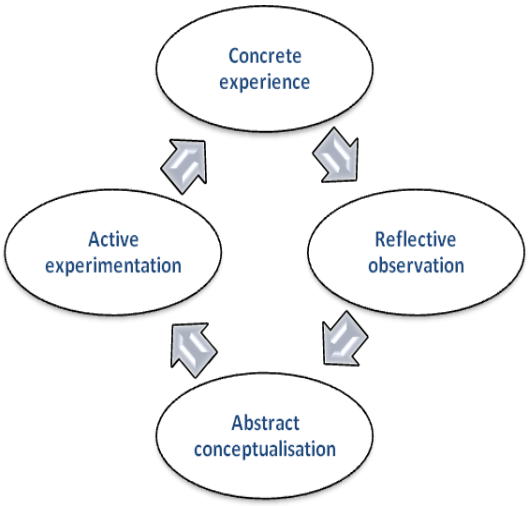
Experiential learning is based on the assumption that the efficiency of the learning process is significantly influenced by the learner's different – physical, mental, subjective, emotional, social etc. – experience related to the studied material and the circumstances in which the whole process takes place. The foundations of experiential learning were set by John Dewey in his work *Experience and Education,* and his ideas were further developed by David Kolb.

In his work *Experiential Learning – Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984) Kolb developed an experiential learning model using a holistic and integrative approach, starting with the comparative study of other three related models– those of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. In Lewin's model of action research and laboratory training, "learning, change and growth are seen to be facilitated best by an integrated process that begins with here-and-now experience followed by collection of data and observation of that experience. The data are then analyzed and the conclusions of this analysis are fed back to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behaviour and choice of new experiences." (Kolb 1984:21) Kolb finds two aspects of this model noteworthy: the emphasis on the *here-and-now concrete experience* as the focal point for learning and the adequate *feedback processes*. Dewey's model of experiential learning "makes more explicit the developmental nature of learning implied in Lewin's conception of it as a feedback process by describing how learning transforms the impulses, feelings, and desires of concrete experience into higher-order purposeful action." (ibid. 22) In Piaget's model "the dimensions of experience and concept, reflexion, and action form the basic continua for the development of adult thought. Development from infancy to adulthood moves from a concrete phenomenal view of the world to an abstract constructionist view, from an active egocentric view to a reflective internalized mode of knowing."(ibid. 23)

In Kolb's opinion these three models form a unique and interesting perspective on learning and personal development. He thinks that this perspective can be characterized by the following propositions: learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes, and it is a continuous process grounded in experience; the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world; learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world and it involves transactions between the person and the environment. According to his definition "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". (ibid. 38)

His famous model of the experiential learning cycle is widely applied in education, including adult development.

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Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

By using drama techniques (mime, certain language games, group discussions, role plays and simulations) in language teaching, we have the possibility to create an environment where our students can experience this type of learning process. They start with a *concrete experience* which means active involvement, because according to this theory, one cannot learn by simply watching or reading about something. In the second stage – that of *reflective observation* – the participants step back from the task to discuss and review what has been experienced. This is an excellent opportunity to verbalize their feelings and opinions while communicating with other members of the group. The *abstract conceptualization* means that the learners reflect upon what they have done comparing it with what they already know - knowledge from textbooks, ideas of other colleagues, previous experience, or any other source of knowledge. In the stage of *active experimentation* the learners try to put into practice what they have learnt.

The Flow Theory – optimal experience and learning

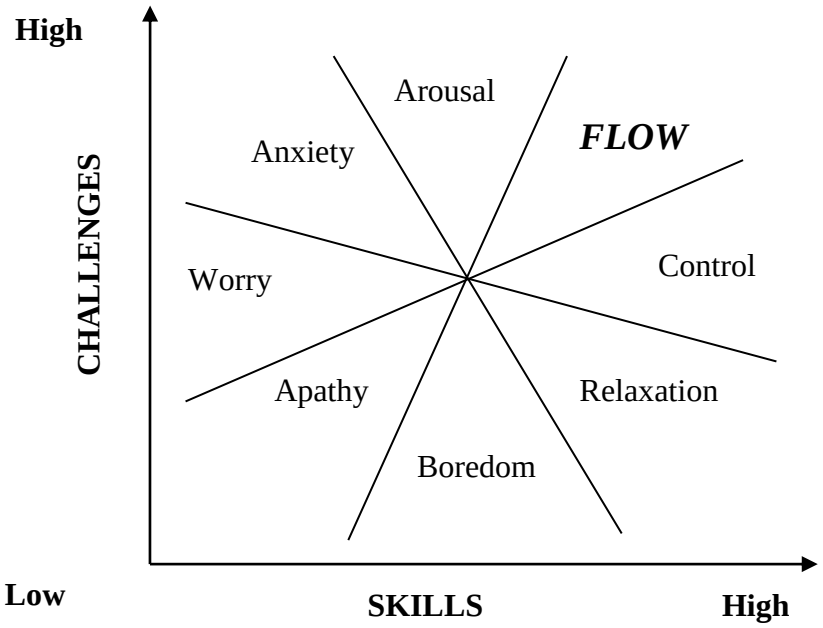
The advantages and benefits of learning through experience have been mentioned above, but the quality of the experience and the emotional context in which the learning process takes place is also an important factor to be taken in consideration. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines and discusses the optimal experience which he calls *flow* in his book *Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* which is based on "decades of research on the positive aspects of human experience – joy, creativity, the total involvement with life". (Csikszentmihalyi 1991:xi)

According to Csikszentmihalyi "we have all experienced moments when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like." (ibid. 3) However, this kind of optimal experience cannot be reached through "passive, receptive, relaxing times". These wonderful "moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile", and he underlines that "such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur". Yet, "in the long-run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery, or perhaps, better, a sense of participation in determining the content of life." (ibid. 3-4)

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Csikszentmihalyi developed the theory of flow by observing and interviewing people who seem to be the masters of such optimal experiences, people who do activities which they love and enjoy most (e.g. some artists, sportsmen). He concluded that the common characteristics of optimal experience are "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted" and the activity itself gives such gratifying experiences "that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it." (ibid. 71)

Csikszentmihalyi created a model, which shows the most important factors and conditions that determine the quality of an experience.



*The **flow** model (Csikszentmihalyi 1997:31)*

According to this model we can see that *flow* occurs „when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable."(Csikszentmihalyi 1997:30). There must be a balance between the person's ability to do something and the opportunities to do it. The challenge shouldn't be too high, because that might cause frustration and anxiety. On the other hand, if it is too low, people can get too relaxed or bored. Apathy appears if both the challenges and skills are low. "But when high challenges are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur." (ibid. 30)

Consequently, the relationship between the learning process and *flow* seems obviously relevant. *Flow* is important because it motivates and helps the learners to perform the tasks at a higher efficiency. In order to feel more often the optimal experience they need new challenges and at the same time the continuous development of their skills. The student whose learning process consists of a succession of *flow* experiences finds that learning is a positive

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activity, a pleasure, compared to those students who need external pressure, continuous encouragement and the threatening perspective of upcoming tests.

According to Goleman, students who experience *flow* are generally more efficient, because the process of mastering a skill at a higher level or acquiring new knowledge is realized in a natural way – the learners commit themselves spontaneously and voluntarily to the subject which they are interested in. They realize that for them the learning process is a source of pleasure and satisfaction – the source of *flow.* In order to maintain flow, they have to keep pushing their limits forward, which leads to high achievements. (Goleman 1995:145)

From this perspective learning appears to be a more positive process, compared to the stressful atmosphere created by test-centric schools, or the endless boredom and routine of certain classes. The flow experience can serve as a strong intrinsic motivation for life-long learning as well.

By using drama techniques in language classes, teachers have the opportunity to create circumstances in which students can learn by *doing*, through *here-and-now* experience. Learners are offered the possibility to stretch and push their limits further and develop their skills – a possibility to experience *flow*.

Constructivist Learning Theory and Constructive Drama

An important point of connection can be found between the *constructivist learning theory* and the main principles of *drama in education*.

Drama in education is a process- and personality-centred method based on pedagogical and pshychological principles, developed from the practice of "as if" games. It is often associated with reform pedagogy, which aims to develop creativity, spontaneity and communicative competence, preparing students to face real-life situations with less difficulty.

Constructivist learning, according to Elizabeth Murphy, involves "multiple perspectives, authentic activities, and real-world environments", which "are just some of the themes that are frequently associated with constructivist learning and teaching" (Murphy 1997). Murphy performed a literature review of constructivist learning and summarized its characteristics: a constructivist learning environment should present and encourage multiple perspectives and representations of concepts and content; goals and objectives should be derived in negotiation with students; teachers should act more like mentors, facilitators, tutors, coaches, monitors, or guides; opportunities, activities, tools, and environments should be provided to encourage metacognition, self-analysis, reflection, and awareness; students should be enabled to play a central role in controlling learning; learning situations and tasks should be authentic, 'real-world'-like; knowledge construction is important, and not reproduction; social negotiation, collaboration and experience is encouraged to construct knowledge; problem-solving, deep and high-order thinking are emphasized; errors represent a learning opportunity; exploration, apprenticeship, collaborative and cooperative learning should be encouraged; assessment must be authentic and interwoven with teaching. (ibid. 1997) Von Glasersfeld believes that "from the constructivist perspective, learning is not a stimulus-response phenomenon. It requires self-regulation and the building of conceptual structures through reflection and abstraction." (Von Glasersfeld in Murphy 1997) Therefore, according to the constructivist approach, the learning process itself - the road leading to understanding - is more important than the final product.

As the actor and drama teacher Gábor Takács points it out, according to both (above mentioned) conceptions learners should be helped to be able to succeed in life and accommodate themselves to their environment through the development of an adaptive knowledge. Teaching students how to be self-sufficient - to be able to develop their own

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conceptions, theories and make their own decisions - is an important aspect of the educational process. The basic principle of constructivist pedagogy is that our knowledge of ourselves and the world is our own construction. This can be brought into connection with an essential principle of drama in education: the most important goal of learning is to develop and define an attitude towards a given problem. (Takács 2009:26)

Takács argues that there is not enough scientific evidence yet which could prove how knowledge is created through drama activities. But he proposes two models that could grasp the essence of this process. These would be *individual understanding* and *knowledge building through learning as a collective activity*. The second one implies that the individual internalizes the knowledge of the group, and if the individuals acquire new knowledge, they share it with the others, who utilize and internalize it. This concept results from a socio-cultural or situational approach and its main idea is that in the learning process thinking and acting takes place in a social context, therefore learning is a social process based on cooperation and interaction. Takács states that *constructivist pedagogy* and *drama in education* can play a beneficial role in reshaping and changing the educational system in a positive way. (ibid. 29)

Parallelisms between playing roles on the stage and in everyday life

Drama techniques have been developed from the experience, methods and techniques of actor training, and have been used in education and personality development (thus in language teaching as well) mainly because there are certain parallelisms between playing a role on stage and playing different roles in real life.

These connections are best shown by sociologist Erving Goffman in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where he uses the imagery of theatre in order to present the relevance of human and social action and interaction. He considers his approach a dramaturgical model of everyday social manifestations. He studied the strategies used by individuals to present themselves in front of other people, the different ways in which they try to guide and control the impressions that others make of them by changing their appearance and manners. An important reason for using such strategies and practices is to avoid being embarrassed or – in certain cases – avoid embarrassing others. His dramaturgical analysis is based on the parallelisms he discovered between theatrical performances and the various roles that people take on in everyday life. In both situations there is an audience. In everyday life this would consist of other people observing the individual's performance and reacting to it. Individuals usually strive to create an idealized picture and ideal impression about themselves in the observers. (Goffman 1956)

One of the main goals of using drama techniques in education is to form and develop social skills, therefore enhancing the awareness of the art of impression-making and the art of playing different roles. In everyday social life the impression we make can be very important. The way other people see us is mainly the result of our interactions and communication skills. Drama techniques have the potential power to help us practice different ways of presenting ourselves in everyday life, offering a possibility to develop and polish the necessary skills.

It is more difficult to shape and influence - in the way we would like to - what others see in our performance or what others think of us *in a target language situation*, mostly because of the inhibitions caused by the possible language barriers, by the imperfections of our target language knowledge. We believe that his can also be helped by using role plays or simulations in the language class.

If the possibilities offered by drama pedagogy are approached from the point of view of our final goal – using drama techniques in teaching English for specific purposes – it seems

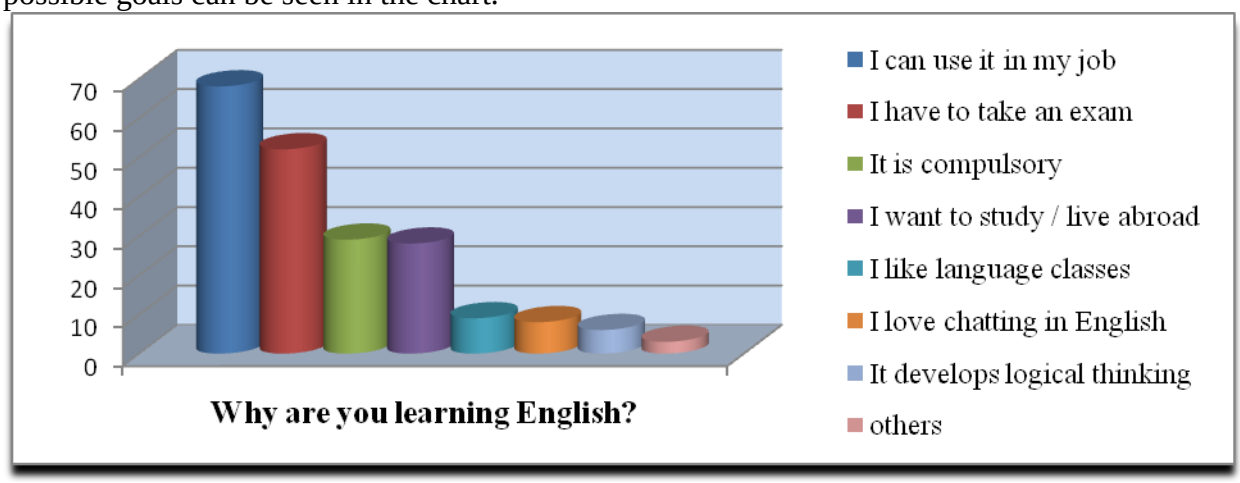
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obvious that these activities can help in the development of speaking skills and the presentation of self in the target language in profession-related situations as well. According to Maley and Duff dramatic activities in a language classroom "give the student an opportunity to use his or her own personality in creating the material on which part of the language class is to be based. These activities draw on the natural ability of every person to imitate, mimic and express himself or herself through gesture. They draw too, on the student's imagination and memory, and natural capacity to bring to life parts of his or her past experience that might never otherwise emerge. They are dramatic because they arouse our interest, which they do by drawing on the unpredictable power generated when one person is brought together with others. Each student brings a different life, a different background into the class. We would like students to be able to use this when working with others" (Maley & Duff 1991:6)

Needs Analysis - Role-plays in Teaching English for Engineering

A needs analysis was conducted with 106 engineering students and engineers about their language learning needs and habits, their experience and opinion regarding role-plays and the popularity and usefulness of role-plays in learning English for specific purposes (ESP). We used the term *role-plays* in this questionnaire, because it can be considered the most widely spread of the language teaching activities defined by the umbrella term *drama techniques (mime, language games, group discussions, role plays and simulations)*, because to different extents *role-plays* can be present in all the above mentioned activity types, and because this term was considered to be more familiar for the respondents than the term *drama technique* would have been.

To the multiple-choice question "Why are you learning English?" most respondents (68) answered that it could help them in their profession. The degree of importance of other possible goals can be seen in the chart.

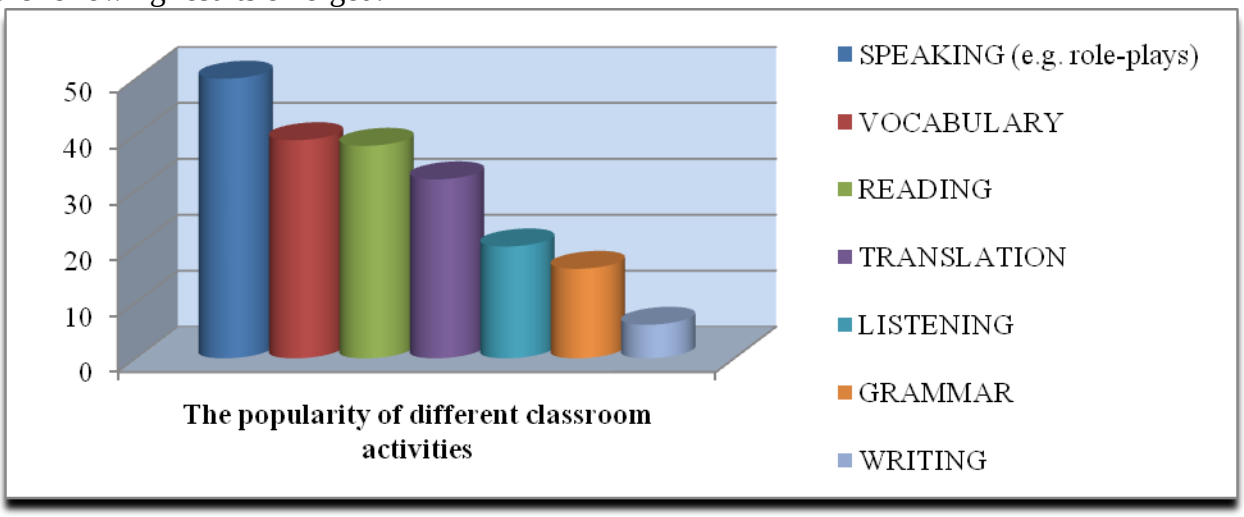


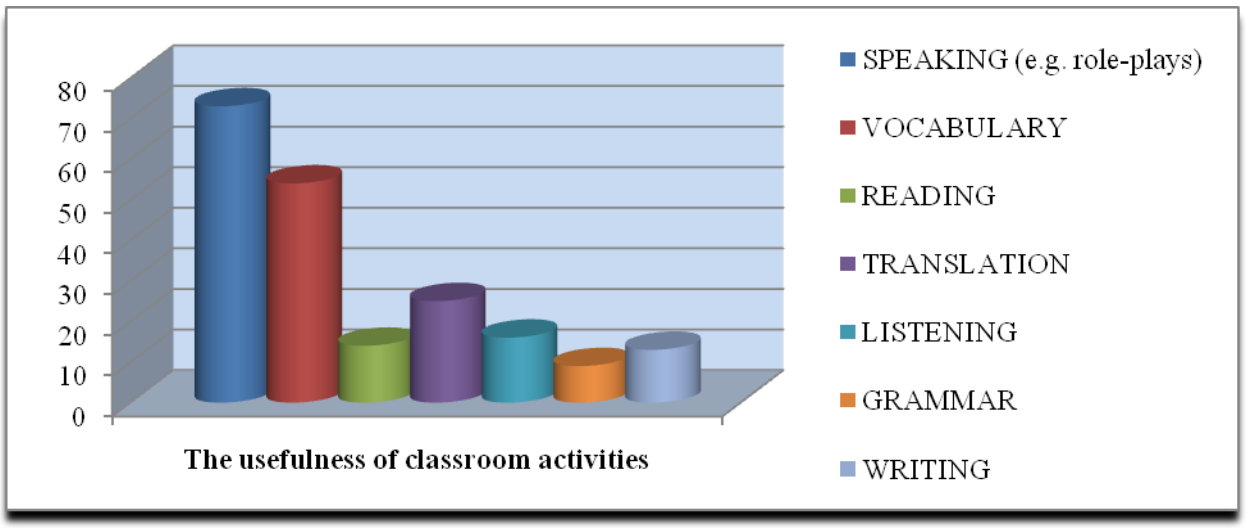
The goals chosen most frequently confirm the importance of the use of tasks developing professional communication skills.

From the answers to other questions, we concluded that there is a notable need for opportunities to practice and develop speaking skills because of the following reasons: in language exams, listening and speaking parts were considered to be the most difficult; the majority of the respondents think that their speaking skills in profession-related situations are less developed than their other skills and they do not have enough opportunities to speak English. This attracts the attention to the necessity of using more communicative activities in teaching ESP.

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To a question regarding the popularity and usefulness of different classroom activities the following results emerged:

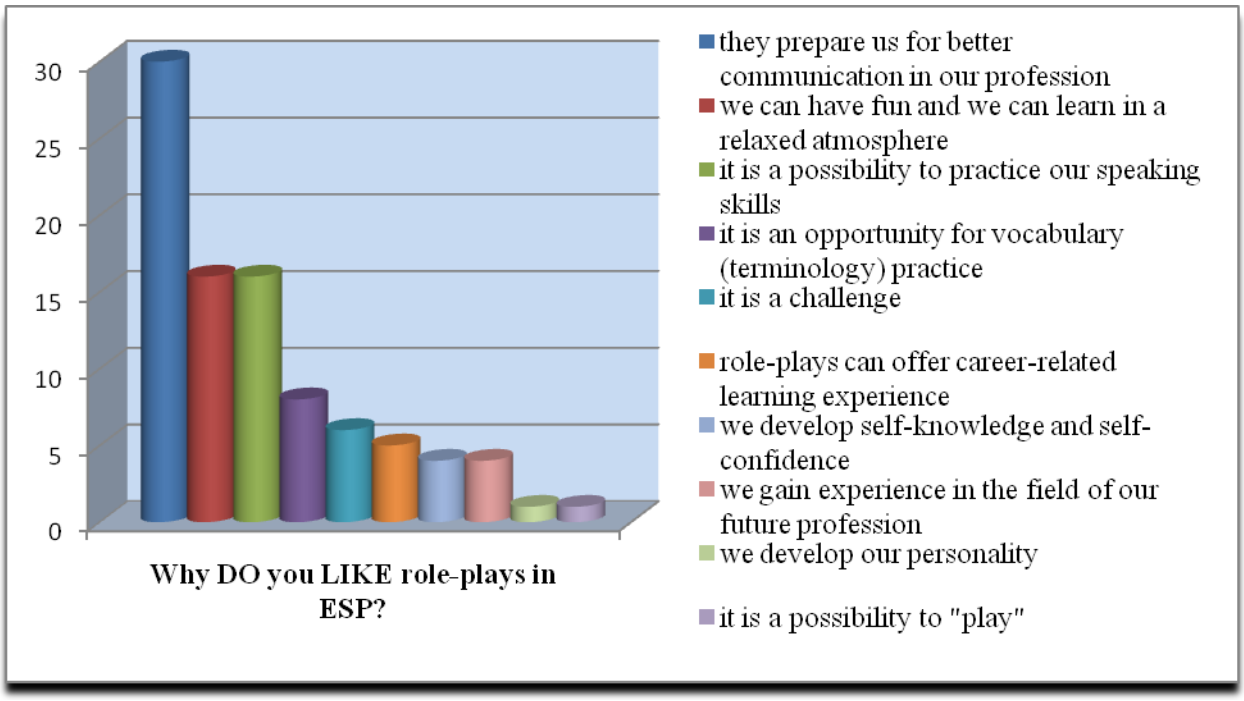




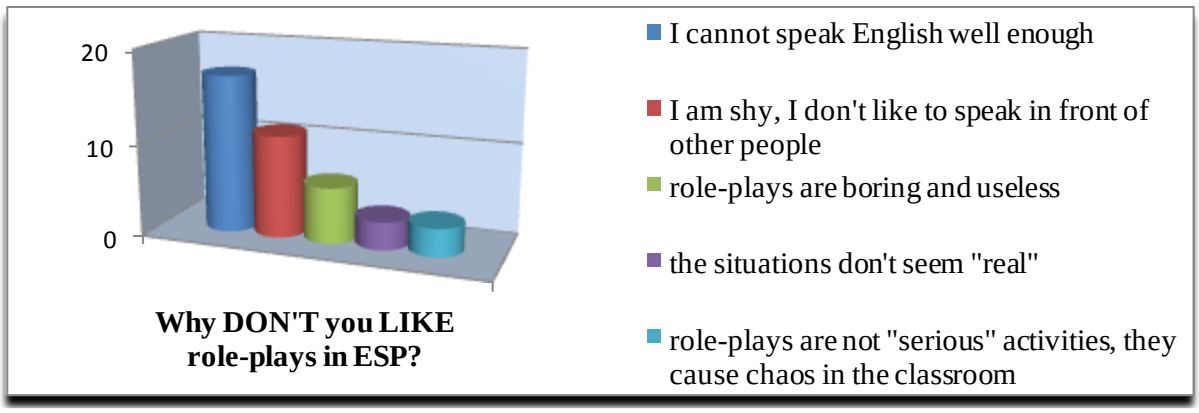
Speaking activities - role-plays included - proved to be the most popular and useful, but a significant difference can be observed between the number of people who liked them most (50 respondents) and those who considered them the most useful (73 respondents). Therefore it would be important to plan these activities in such a way as to make them enjoyable for more students. Drama techniques could be of great help in this endeavour.

In another question the respondents were asked whether they liked role-plays in ESP classes or not. 66% liked and 35% did not like them. The respondents were also asked to give reasons for their answers. The reasons they gave to the question why they like or do not like role-plays were grouped into categories. There were answers which could be and therefore were enlisted into two or even more categories.

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A great number of respondents like role-plays in ESP because they think these activities prepare them for better communication in different profession-related situations. A lot of them like this type of activity because they feel more relaxed and like to have fun while studying. The development of speaking skills and vocabulary (terminology) practice were also frequently mentioned.



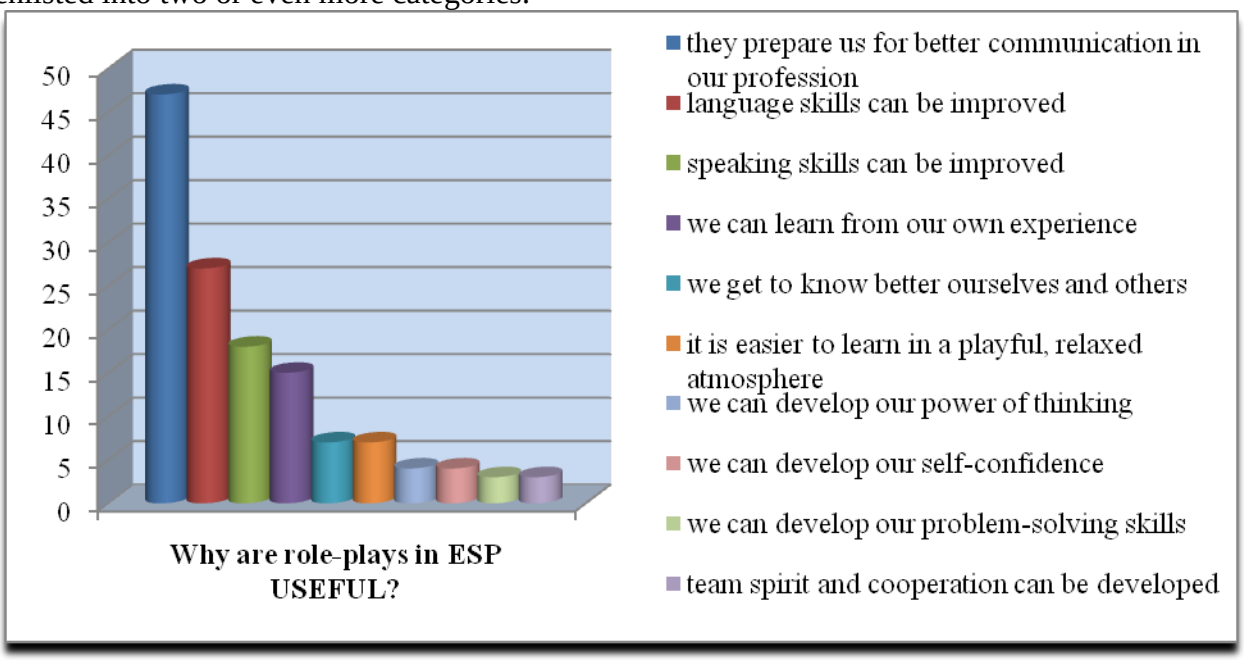
The reasons given by the respondents who do not like role-plays in learning ESP must be seriously analysed and taken into consideration in the development and planning of such activities, because one of the main goals of development would be to eliminate these problems.

Regarding the most frequently mentioned problem, role-plays should be more suitable to the level of the group so that they would not cause frustration. In this way the participants would soon realize that this is a great opportunity for practicing speaking. Shyness and fear of speaking in front of the others can be overcome if we manage to create a friendly atmosphere where the students feel emotionally safe and ready to help each other. To make the role-plays seem “boring” or “useless” can be a great challenge for the teacher. Here the warm-up phase preceding the “main activity” gains more relevance. It is also important to carefully choose the topic, according to the needs and interests of the group. This helps to create the feeling of “reality”. If everybody is actively involved and interested in the activity there should not be

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more "chaos" or disciplinary problems than in any other profession-related situation. The use of ideas and techniques from the field of drama in education could be of great help in improving the quality and popularity of role-plays in ESP.

Another question referred to the usefulness of role-play activities in ESP classes. The respondents were asked whether they considered them useful or not. 94% of them considered them useful and only 6% thought they were not useful. They were also asked to give reasons for their answers. The reasons they gave to the question why they consider role-plays in ESP useful were grouped into categories. There were answers which could be and therefore were enlisted into two or even more categories.



We can see that the reasons given to support the usefulness of role-plays in learning ESP confirm the ones from the specialized literature. It is important to emphasize that the vast majority of the respondents think that role-plays are useful, even those who do not like them. From the 35 people who declared that they did not like role-plays only 6 did not consider them useful. This fact draws the attention to the necessity of better planning and development of these classroom activities in order to make them enjoyable to almost all of our students. Otherwise role-plays may not serve their purpose adequately.

Conclusions

The most important benefit of using drama techniques in education is that they prepare the participants for real-life situations through experience, experimentation and joyful activity. The theories discussed in this study support the essential advantages that drama activities (role-plays) offer: a safe environment where the participants can speak and act free of constraints and inhibitions, can discover their needs, skills and talents, can learn to find and identify the objective truth. They have the possibility to create their own ideas and images of the world, and develop their senses and reflectiveness.

Drama techniques are regarded as an effective alternative tool in developing the learners' communicative competence in the target language and their ability to perform certain roles in the possible "scenes" of everyday life or their future professions. The majority of the adult learners who study English for specific purposes like these activities, they find

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them useful, and are aware of the fact that role plays and simulations help them prepare for their future profession.

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