

Creativity in teaching and learning: Fantasy Role Play Activities in Higher Education

Andrea Salayová

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to introduce three fantasy role play activities used in teaching of medical terminology at the faculty of medicine at Masaryk University in Brno. The paper argues that using the methods usually associated with younger students does have the benefits even in higher education, such as improving the atmosphere in the class, motivating the students and supporting the deeper learning. The activities are adaptable to any language class, so sharing the experience with working with them both in online and in-person classroom can inspire the teachers of any language (or other subjects) to incorporate the roleplay activities to their classes.

Key words: roleplay, higher education, creative teaching, interactive activities

Introduction

There are various opinions on the topic of role play activities in higher education, especially at universities. In the serious learning environment, the students do not expect to be entering magical kingdoms or becoming the witches and wizards during their weekly Latin class. Sometimes there is some resistance at first, but at the end they not only enjoy it, but let their creativity take the lead, which also supports the deeper learning, cooperation and positive approach to the class in general.¹ Just as Cherney (2008, p. 154) states: *“Teaching at its finest requires that instructors consider every educational tool at their command – an assortment of techniques and technologies – to provide their students the richest educational experience possible”*.

The aim of this paper is to share the experience of using three types of role-play activities while teaching medical terminology at the faculty of medicine at Masaryk University in Brno during the years 2020–2023. These activities can be modified to fit into various (mainly) language classes of medium size (app. 20 students) and they can take between 20 to 40 minutes to complete. These activities were tested on the students at the Faculty of Medicine in Brno, in their first year of studies, both in Czech and English programme. English programme groups can be especially challenging, because they include the mix of students from various cultural and language backgrounds, with various levels of learning abilities and learning styles.

In otherwise very rigid subject, such as medical terminology, which offers little opportunities for diverse types of learning activities, that would be useful in other

¹ Nilson (1998); Watson et al. (1996).

languages that can be actively spoken, role play exercises can help to diversify the classroom time and energize the participants. This creates the positive atmosphere within the class and motivates, which is “*a critical component of learning*” (Leamson, 2000). Students are also asked to create something in the course of the exercise, which raises their satisfaction at the end and in the process of doing and creating, the learning process is much more immersive and effective. Simply said, these activities help the students to learn (Lawson, 1995).

Seemingly illogical is the fact that the aim of fantasy role play is not to imitate the real life as it is in the most commonly used type of role play in higher education.² While this high credibility role play is important, fantasy role play can unlock the creativity in a different way and I believe it can have its place in all levels of education.

Research also shows that concepts introduced through active learning enhanced the understanding of the materials. Students in standard lectures were consistently remembering less than those taught by creative methods – by roughly 20%, according to the study by Goldwater and Acker (1975) or Rickard et al. (1988) and also supported by the paper published by Cherney (2008), in which “*two studies examined the free recall for course content of 314 American undergraduate students across various course levels*”³ After the end of the course, the students were asked to list 10 things they remembered from it and the results across all groups showed that 4 out of 5 responses were related to activities.⁴

1 Magical Kingdom I. – Saving the Princess

The first activity is introduced to the students in their second semester, when they have the sufficient knowledge to successfully complete it. The aim of this activity is to practice how to write a medical diagnosis and revise the appropriate vocabulary.

The students are divided into the groups of 4 (approximately 5 groups per mid-size classroom) and given the instructions as follows (either orally or written on a piece of paper, a slide in a presentation can also be used):

“Once upon a time, there was a magical kingdom in a far away land. Everyone in the kingdom was very happy until one day a great sadness fell on everyone. The princess has fallen sick. Doctors from all over the world have been called and trying to save her, but no one could figure out what this mysterious illness is. You are a group of 4 well known doctors and you have decided to go on a quest to save the princess. Make a journey to the magic kingdom and figure out what happened to the princess. Write down the

² See the typology of the roleplay by Rao, Stupans (2012, p. 430).

³ Cherney (2008, p. 152).

⁴ Cherney (2008, p. 166).

symptoms and the diagnosis in Latin. After you heal the princess one person from each group will attend the conference where they will share your findings”.

Students then work in groups to come up with a story and translating the diagnoses. The teacher monitors the process and offers help when needed, for example when students have a bigger idea than their vocabulary is sufficient for. The time needed for this part of the activity depends on the group, with more creative groups even up to 20 minutes, but usually 10 to 15 minutes is sufficient. The teacher can allot the exact time beforehand, so the students know exactly how much time they have to elaborate.

When the time is up or when the teacher sees all groups finished working, everyone is invited to present their work. During the “conference” part, the teacher and the rest of the class provide the feedback regarding the grammar and the structure of their diagnosis. It is also possible to come up with a prize for the best story, which is voted on by the students at the end (groups cannot vote for themselves).

2 Magical Kingdom II. – Witches and Wizards

Once the topic of the magical kingdom has been introduced, it can be modified and revisited at any point in semester. Very convenient time for the second visit is during the topic of medical prescriptions, when the students are learning how to properly write one, use the appropriate abbreviations and memorize which parts the complete medical prescription has.

The students are again divided into the groups of 4 (preferably the same ones as in the previous exercise) and are given the instructions as follows:

“After you saved the princess the word of your skills has reached even the furthest corners of the kingdom. The king was so grateful he awarded you the titles of official witches and wizards and provided you with a very valuable piece of real estate right in the middle of the magical forest. Here you have established your own magical office, where the creatures and magical beings from the entire kingdom come to ask for your help with their various ailments. Tell us what magical creature did you help with which ailment and then show us a recipe to a magical potion you prescribed him as a medicine. Make sure it is grammatically correct and nothing is missing!”

Students then work in the groups on the assignment and then present their recipe to their classmates when they are finished. The teacher monitors the classroom, answers the questions and checks the correctness of the results.

This activity is very popular among the students and also very effective, because ever since introducing it, the students have no problems recalling the parts of the prescription during the final exam, which had been one of the most problematic

topics before. It is also one of the most frequently mentioned points in the final course evaluation questionnaire, that the students are supposed to fill in at the end of the semester. The questions are very open – for example “What did you like about the class? What would you change?”, so them mentioning this activity has even higher value.

3 Magical Kingdom III. – Autopsy of the magical creature

This activity is introduced in the week when the students are supposed to learn about the structure of the autopsy report and how to correctly fill one in, shortly before their dissection week at the end of the semester. After the presentation about the autopsy report itself, the students are given following instructions:

“Welcome back to the magical kingdom! This time there has been an interesting development in the magical forest. There is a buzz all around about the unknown magical creature that had been found nearby. Unfortunately, it had been dead. Your task is to perform the autopsy on this creature and correctly fill in the medical report. Make sure to correctly describe all interesting body parts and organs of this creature and its cause of death. At the end, present your findings to your classmates”.

This activity also proved to be very popular among the students, many of whom also include illustrations of the creatures and very elaborate stories about them. Possible variation of this activity is called “The Alien Autopsy”, in which the imaginary autopsy is being performed on an alien instead of the magical creature and the students are supposed to describe all the body parts and organs that are different than the ones found on the human body. During this version, the music is used to create the atmosphere. The instructions are as follows:

“The year is 1947. New Mexico. USA. You are a group of small-town doctors. There have been some strange events going on in said town – UFO crashes. The secret services have asked you to examine the alien body that had been found at the side of the crash. Fill in the blank autopsy report in front of you with the information you find out about the alien (Students are encouraged to use their imagination). Note all differences to human body (missing organs or limbs, extra body parts, etc.). Don’t forget to correctly note the cause of death. You will present your findings at the top-secret conference in approximately 20 minutes.”⁵

In some groups, the students are very invested in their magical kingdoms, so for them the first version of the activity is recommended, but if it seems like the change of the setting is something that could benefit the class, the second version is used. If there is leftover time in one of the following classes or during the

⁵ I have described this version of the activity in more detail in the paper by me and my colleague: Salayová, A. & Gachallová, N. (2023). Creative Group Exercises as an Educational Tool in Teaching Professional Language. *Humanising Language Teaching. Pilgrims*, 25, 1, 1–3.

revision period at the end of the year, the unused version can be offered to the students to help them revise not only parts of the autopsy report, but vocabulary in general and considering that the autopsy report consists of medical diagnoses, it can be very valuable revision tool before the final exam, which included translation of medical diagnoses both in written part and in oral part.

Here are some of the examples of the illustrations of the aliens from students' alien autopsy reports:⁶

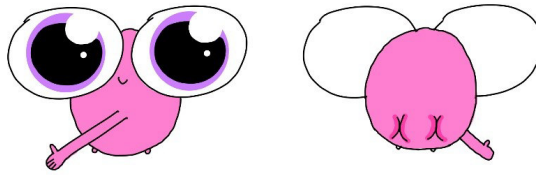


Sometimes the students create even more illustrations on their tablets from their own initiative (where they are not constricted by the human form on the blank autopsy report) and here are some examples.

Conclusion

Even though using seemingly childish activities in higher education may seem silly at first, fantasy roleplay can be an interesting tool to change the atmosphere in

⁶ All pictures are taken and owned by author and used in this paper with the permission of the students.



MORBUS PRINCIPALIS

- exitus letalis post lapsus

COMPLICATIONES

- dislocatio pedis tertii
- fractura aperta caudae

CAUSA MORBIS

- apertura capitis dx.

DIAGNOSES ACLE SORIAE

- blepharoplastica
- balbuties capitis sinistrae elivici seraphim
- gaster accessorium
- cauda
- duo pedes accessorii

FERRO

class and engage students in a different way, especially if the topic of the class can feel monotone and draining. When students think creatively, their learning becomes easier and deeper, resulting in better information retention and less time spent memorizing at home. The more interesting and different the learning activity is, the better are the levels of memory retention (Restorff, 1933). This is also proved by Symons and Johnson (1997), connecting the learning to elaboration, which is the core concept of the activities provided. Learning this way could also be considered “accidental”, i.e., the students are not actively focusing on memoriz-

ing the material, which also have been shown to have higher information recall levels (Smyth, Kosslyn, 2007).

These activities are also the great tool to keep to students focused and keep their attention on the task at hand, which is the key in learning environment (Craik et al., 1996), which was also proved by neuroimaging studies (Shallice et al., 1994). The activities are also very distinct, which means they will offer more powerful memory retrieval cues at later time (Smyth, Kosslyn, 2007). As Cherney (2008, p. 154) states: “Many instances of forgetting occur not because the information sought has been lost from memory, but because the cues used to probe memory are ineffective. Context provides very powerful retrieval cues. Memories are stronger and more detailed when they are experienced and rich in context cues”.

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Author

Mgr. Andrea Salayová, Ph.D., Language Centre, Faculty of Medicine, Masaryk University, Brno
Andrea Salayová is an assistant professor at the Language Centre at the Faculty of Medicine at Masaryk University in Brno. She obtained her doctoral degree in Classical Philology from Department of Classical Studies at the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University in 2021. She currently teaches in both Czech and English programme and focuses on the creative and interactive teaching methods and on technology supported teaching.