Teaching English Speaking Skills to L2 Students using Role – Play Method: What do Teachers in Malawi Say?

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ABSTRACT

The study is aimed at analyzing the effectiveness of the 'Role-Play' method in teaching the spoken language to secondary school students in Malawi. The study targeted six secondary schools selected in South West and Northern Education divisions. The data was qualitative in nature and it was collected through in-depth interviews solicited from 18 English teachers. The findings indicate that the 'role-play' method is effective in teaching speaking skills to L2 students in Malawi. When students are involved in role-plays, speaking skills such as fluency, pronunciation, and use of gestures are developed. These speaking skills are anchored by situational real life language demands that inculcate in them registers, and remove inhibition. However, time constraints, students' low English proficiency, special needs learners, large classes, class disruptions, and persistent learner inhibitions, were reported to be some of the challenges that weigh down the effectiveness of the method. Still, the teachers' emphasis on discipline, clear instructions and directions, thorough preparation, supervision, and In-Service Trainings can help mitigate the challenges.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Role-play, Communicative Competence..

INTRODUCTION:

Different teacher training programs impact in student-teachers a variety of teaching methods, and skills they can use in their future teaching related careers. However, most of the methods that are advocated in the modern education system are borrowed from the West and there is limited research to assess their effectiveness especially in third world countries like Malawi. This study is set to find out from practicing teachers in Malawi about their experiences and views of using the role-play method in the teaching spoken English in secondary schools. The research intended to get the practical realities from experienced teachers regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with role-play method.

The status of English teaching in Malawi:

Malawi is a highly multilingual nation located in the southern part of Africa with an estimated current population of 19 million[1] with illiteracy levels of 66% (Visonà, 2017).The country has over 16 languages, and the majority of its citizens speak one or more indigenous languages as their mother tongue. Due to its multilingualism and multi-ethnicity, Malawi adopted two main languages: Chichewa, chosen for national

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[1]This is according to data from World Population Review available on http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malawi-population/

unification, and English as an official language. The two languages play an outsize role in the country due to the influence of its first post-independence President, Dr. Kamuzu Banda, and the country's legacy as an erstwhile colony of the United Kingdom (Kishindo, 1998); (Kamwendo, 2016); (Visonà, 2017). Since its adoption, English, in Malawi, has been a very essential and powerful language for communication to a vast majority of people, occupying the center stage in all official communications, which are both in academics and in business transactions (Mamo & Yigzaw, 2015). As such, English is offered as a core and mandatory subject so that students learn at all levels of national education. It is an academic success tool; therefore, it is pertinent that one should be proficient and must strive to become an expert in English encompassing all the four aspects (i.e. writing, speaking, listening, and reading) as an ideal native speaker. However, the focus of English teaching in Malawian secondary schools has for a long time been placed on mastering the forms of language where crucial elements of grammar are comprehensively studied. This has pushed spoken English to the margins of classroom language teaching, which makes secondary school learners meet challenges in displaying their communicative competency. The revised English syllabus implemented in 2015 in Malawian secondary schools came as a way of addressing this challenge by shifting the focus from the mastery of grammar to developing communicative competence in learners. Language educators identified role-play as one of the crucial teaching methods that could help teachers effectively impart speaking skills (Klippel, 1984). This study, therefore, assesses the effectiveness of the role-playing method by specifically examining the challenges and opportunities associated with it in Malawian Secondary schools.

Traditional Approaches versus Communicative Approaches:
There have been two dominant views concerning the teaching of English language: traditional approaches and communicative approaches (Liao,2000); (Richards, 2006); (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). Some English methodologists have supported the traditional approaches, where language teaching focuses on a structured system of grammar, while others have argued for communicative approaches (Nunan, 1988). Traditional approaches, which dominated language teaching up to the late 1960s, involved techniques that were often used in a language class demanding students to learn through memorization of some dialogues, practice question-and-answer tasks, substitution drills and other forms of guided speaking (Richards, 2006).

However, traditional approaches to language teaching have seriously been challenged, and consequently, they have been branded as ineffective. For instance, (Nunan, 2001a) argues that traditional approaches made learners give responses in predictable situations after being drilled, but effectively they failed to communicate in the real world. Similarly, (Kasumi, 2015) and (Laili, 2015) observe that when learners are taught using other methods of language teaching (traditional approaches), they memorize the responses at that moment in the classroom, but fail to use the same linguistic knowledge when needed outside in real life situations. As the language demands keep on changing from place to place, time to time, subject to subject and from one participant to the other, speakers need to be adaptive to different language contexts. With this understanding in mind, authentic situations were required so that learners would act in a similar pattern as they would outside the class in the real world (Farooq, 2015).

Justification for the Acquisition of Speaking Skills:
Acquiring speaking skills is very essential to learners of L2 for them to communicate effectively to meet the current and future demands of the society. As such, it is worrisome when learners fail to communicate effectively through speech even after spending many years of English language learning. Therefore, there is need to focus on communicative functions of the language to help L2 learners attain communicative competence. However, this does not deny the fact that the grammatical elements are important in their own right; rather, they should be taught to L2 learners in context so that students learn their meanings and functions on how they are used in real life speech situations or conversations. This is justifiable because in real life conversation, speakers are not demanded to isolate different elements of grammar in order to encode meaning. They are simply required to know how to use a particular word to encode a variety of meanings to listeners. Studies have supported the need for students to be given more opportunities to practice language in order to attain communicative competency (Mamo & Yigzaw, 2015); (Kasumi, 2015). Kasumi (2015) further argues that English of the twenty-first century should be 'English for communication' and not just as an object of study. (Nunan, 2001a) further notes that acquiring speaking abilities is the critical goal of L2 learning and the other language skills are eclipsed by its significance.

Role-Play Method:

Role-play has been defined as a teaching method involving a spontaneous portrayal of situation, condition or circumstances by selected members of a learning group (Mtunda & Safuli, 1986). This involves assigning different roles to members of a group along with the objectives to be achieved. Likewise, (Ladousse, 1987) and (Furness, 1976) observe that role-playing is one of the communicative methods, which can help learners develop fluency in language. If learners engage in role-play, repeatedly, they attain flexibility and can master numerous situations requiring the use of language, which assist them apply the language more easily to new situations. This is also echoed by (Killen, 1998) who argues that through role-plays, learners practice real life language demands, which would help them attain communicative competence. Besides this, it also provides situational language demands through which, shy learners are motivated to participate (Larsen-Freeman, 2000); (Klippel, 1984); (Islam & Islam, 2012). In a study by Eltis and Low (1985), on the usefulness of various teaching activities, role-play was ranked second with 56%, while small group work came first with 80%. In a related survey, when teachers were asked to choose two activities, which they rated as important, role-playing was one of the chosen activities (Nunan, 1988).

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING:

The study has been inspired by insights from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Instituted in the 1970s, CLT has had a remarkable impact on language teaching approaches in the present day all over the world (Richards, 2006); (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). It was particularly influenced by the council of Europe, as European linguists deemed it necessary for language teachers to focus on communicative competence rather than exclusively master of language structures (Littlewood, 2007). Language teaching should focus on the provision of opportunities to learners so that they use English for communication. Enough time should be spent on language activities, which in turn would require learners to perform what they will actually do outside the class in the real world; in fact, this could be summarized as language demands as opposed to controlled practice or drills (Nunan, 1988), which helps learners develop the ability to express themselves freely, clearly and intelligibly in different situations both in class and in the real world. In this case, the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator and not a model for correct speech in language activities. Furthermore, the approach also stresses on learners' learning through interactive activities such as role-play rather than memorization of dialogues and drills. Most importantly, grammatical points should not be taught in isolation but rather in context (Richards, 2006); (Liao, 2000).Therefore, the teacher is required to bring in authentic language materials that will help learners understand how language works in real life communication.

Results of the studies on the implementation of CLT have revealed that the approach can be productive and can bring success to both teachers and learners. The use of CLT can lead to improved communicative competence among L2 students. Kasumi (2015) argues that in this approach, what is most important is to speak a language, and not elaborate how a language works. According to him, there are many people all over the world who speak a language in real conversations even though most of them do not necessarily attend any language course. This shows that the ability to communicate is more significant than just knowing structures and forms of a language.

What do teachers say about their teaching?

To answer this question, it is important to borrow from various studies that have looked at reflective teaching, especially those that have explored the relations between teachers' actions and what they think about their actions (Marcos & Tillema, 2006); (Bansilal & Rosenberg, 2011); (Marcos, Sanchez, & Tillema, 2011). There are a range of articles and studies that aim at understanding teacher thinking, their capacities for self-research, reflection, and beliefs. Such studies have contributed immensely to building a knowledge base on teaching (Bansilal & Rosenberg, 2011). Modern teacher training programs recommend that teachers need to collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching. In doing so, teachers can discover new ideas that can help in making educational reforms. Therefore, the study is set to investigate servicing teachers' perception on role-play, which is one of the commendable teaching methods in CLT. It attempts to answer the following three research questions:

1. Which language skills are developed using the role-play method?
2. What are the opportunities that are associated with using role-play in Malawi?

3. What are some of the challenges teachers face in using role play in Malawi?

Responses to these questions shed light into the practical realities of some methods, encouraged primarily through theory-based training programs.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS:

This study was conducted using a naturalistic inquiry approach due to its reliance on qualitative and interpretive narratives which were obtained through in-depth examination of the teachers' own perspectives. We targeted 18 experienced English secondary school teachers in Malawi (irrespective of gender) from South West and Northern Education divisions, selected using purposive sampling. We targeted qualified teachers with a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree, and who had taught English for not less than 10 years. Therefore, by identifying one English teacher from a particular secondary school, s/he in turn, referred the researchers to other English teachers in the same school or the other yielding to snowball sampling. Every teacher was coded for easy referencing in our discussion.

The data has been analyzed thematically where information has been categorized according to key themes emerging from data collected, and in line with the objectives of the study. Qualitative data analysis involved making sense of data in terms of the participants' meanings of the situation, noticing patterns, recurrent themes, and categories in the raw data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The recorded data from the interviews was transcribed and coded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Speaking skills developed in L2 through Role-Playing:
Fluency:

Teachers reported that when they used role-plays, learners developed more fluency in communication. They argued that if learners are given more opportunities to use language in the classroom, they are more likely to develop the courage to speak in public for longer periods in a clearer, continuous and comprehensive manner. One teacher reported that *"Once students are talking in public, they have to make sure that: they are fluent, articulate and with time, they sharpen these skills."*[T 11].While the other teacher said that:

"I had one student in my class who was very poor in spoken English, and her friends were just laughing at her whenever she was speaking and she used to cry. But with time through the use of role-playing and encouragement, she was able to improve her fluency, and now she is one of the students selected to go to university."[T. 13]

The teachers stressed that fluency is vital in communication because it helps listeners understand clearly the message being communicated. In addition, influent speeches remove listener's interest in paying attention to the message being communicated. This is also in line with (Ladousse, 2004)also echoed by (Islam & Islam, 2012) who established that with a series of role-plays used in the classroom, learners developed confidence while speaking in public such as a large class, which eventually lead to improved fluency. This also concurs with one of the principles of CLT, which stipulates that any CLT approach should strive at developing both fluency and accuracy in learners (Richards, 2006).

Pronunciation (Tone, Stress, and Intonation):

It was reported that with role-play method, English teachers can help learners use tone, stress, and intonation appropriately. The teachers highlighted that in order to communicate the exact meaning of an expression, an utterance or a text the students are role playing on; they have to adhere to speech elements of tone, stress, and intonation. They cited different examples in order to stress the importance of acquiring pronunciation skills. For instance, they said that students are supposed to know when to use an angry or happy tone depending on the communicative situation at hand without which the actual meaning of the message can be seriously distorted. One of the teachers reported that:

"When participating in role-play, as a teacher you can teach students in general about tone, stress and intonation but during role-play, you can also tell students to try using these skills on their own, and see if they understand when to use such a tone, when to stress such a point…the whole role-play can give you a forum of playing around with various speech elements." [T.1]

Therefore, role-playing provides an opportunity for the teacher to impart the speech elements of tone, stress, and intonation in L2 students. One respondent summarized the importance of acquiring these speaking

skills with a quotation which says:*"What you speak is more important when spoken correctly."* [T.3]
Tone and intonation are stipulated in the secondary English syllabus of Malawi as some of the skills any speaking lesson tries to achieve and a role-play being one of the methods that can be utilized in a speaking lesson; the results are consistent with the expectations of the syllabus (M.I.E., 1998).Tone, stress, and intonation are very important aspects of pronunciation useful in oral communication as they affect meaning of an utterance altogether. Meaning is affected when a speaker mixes up the tone, stress, and intonation meant to be used in one case for another which can result into misinterpretation. By implication, the aim of inculcating learners with these pronunciation skills is to make meaningful communication possible. Thus, it directly suits CLT approaches which strive at making meaningful communication a success (Richards, 2006).

Gestures and Body Language:
The research subjects also pointed out that role-playing develops in learners, an ability to use gestures and body language appropriately. Gestures and body language are very essential as they reinforce whatever speakers say. Therefore, when learners have been given a chance to role-play, they use verbal speech alongside gestures and body language to communicate a variety of information and feelings which eventually help them become good public speakers. One of the teachers said: *"Through the use of role-plays, my students have learnt how to use gestures and body language such as facial expressions, hands and other body parts appropriately to express emotions and feelings of the words they speak."* [T.4]. Islam and Islam (2012) also established that with a series of role-plays, the ability of L2 learners' use of gestures improve substantially. When students are engaged in role-plays, they use gestures and facial expressions to communicate a variety of feelings, and reinforce the meaning of their utterances. Good speakers are expected to use gestures and body language effectively and skillfully in oral communication.

Opportunities for using Role-Playing Method:
Real-Life Language Situations:
The teachers pointed out that role-plays provide a platform for language teachers to bring real world language situations in a speaking lesson. These real world language situations would require learners to practice using the target language, which would eventually be applied in real life. Therefore, through the use of role-plays, English teachers teach students how to deal with real world language demands. If learners are able to communicate effectively through speech while in class, they are very likely to do the same outside the class. They can also relate what they learn to what happens in real life as quoted from one of the teachers:
"In order to claim that learners have really learnt, anything they learn in class is supposed to be applied outside in real world language demands. They have to be productive in the society they are living in, and this is the real purpose of education. Therefore, whatever they communicate in class has to be tried in real life…there are some things that students are taught and fail to understand because they fail to relate them to real life situations." [T.9]
One teacher provided an example which demonstrate the importance of bringing real life situations to the classroom for language learners.*"The teacher can bring in a job interview and train learners how to express themselves or how to respond to questions in job interviews through role-playing. Eventually, they will not have problems when it comes to real interviews in future."* [T.5]. (Killen, 1998) also notes that role-plays provide opportunities for students to practice real life language demands by using the target language, and therefore, helping L2learners attain communicative competence even outside the class. Moreover, the study by (Islam & Islam, 2012) also pointed out that learners managed to perform in simulated real life situations when they were given a series of role-plays to perform. This idea points directly to some principles of CLT: that they make real communication the focus of language learning, and they provide opportunities for learners to experiment what they know (Richards, 2006).

A Platform for the Acquisition of Registers:
Language teachers reported that role-playing provides a stage on which learners can play around with different registers utilized in different fields. Since the authentic world has diverse realms or situations requiring the use of language, learners need to have knowledge of how to communicate effectively in all these areas. As a result, learners will be empowered to use language in a variety of ways in different areas. They also felt that learners develop creativity and critical thinking since they are required to think

of the language that suits the context they find themselves in. Therefore, English teachers should bring different texts from which learners can role-play such as obituaries, court proceedings, wedding speeches, and telephone conversations so that learners should acquaint themselves with how to speak in a particular context, setting or field. For instance, teachers had this to say: *"The way somebody speaks at a funeral is totally different from the way one can speak during court proceedings."* [T.6] *"It gives students a wide range of words which are used in different situations. For instance, when they are at a wedding, they choose which words to speak; when they are at the hospital, they choose which words to speak, so it gives variation…"* [T.7].

According to (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), with role-plays, learners can practice how they can communicate orally depending on different social context and social roles at hand. Once they master these registers, they become capable of communicating and understanding different speech situations outside the class. Contextual language situations also help learners acquire sociolinguistic and discourse competency since what learners learn by the end of the instruction is how to use language in the societies they live, in a variety of ways, different social environments, and to diverse interlocutors, an idea that fits in with the description of CLT as presented by (Richards, 2006), which says learners should be given opportunities to adjust their language usage to different situations.

Removal of Learner Inhibition:

With role-play, some inhibited students become motivated to participate because they are exciting and they significantly reduce their nervousness. With frequent usage and involvement of learners in role-plays, their ability to speak in public improves and consequently, their speaking skills are developed as well. The teachers accounted that in their language classes, L2 learners have improved their public speaking abilities because they have been motivated and encouraged to participate in the role-plays. One respondent said: *"Role-play does a lot as far as removing timidity in many learners is concerned…"* [T.4], and another teacher said, *"Role-play gives room for even the shy students to participate fully and express themselves freely."* [T.5]. (Ladousse, 1987) and (Islam & Islam, 2012) also note that role-plays provide a mask for shy learners to participate with relative ease. If L2 students in Malawian secondary schools become competent in these areas, it can be a positive development to the nation at large since English is a medium of instruction as well as vital in communication.

Challenges of using Role-Play in Malawi:
Class Disruption:

The teachers complained of classes being disrupted because of role-playing. In the first place, they pointed out that this can arise from the nature of the role-play. If the topic of the role-play is too entertaining, sometimes the lesson is disrupted and eventually, the teacher might fail to control the class. This results into failure to achieve lesson objectives. They also highlighted that the problem is aggravated when the classes are too overcrowded, which in turn poses a challenge towards class management. It was reported that at times a class is disrupted when there is a mismatch between teachers' initial plan, and the outcome of the role-play emanating from learners' misunderstanding of what they are required to do. Consequently, they produce a role-play, which is contrary to the expectations of the teacher.

Teachers noted that *"sometimes, learners take the role-play activity as a playing field and they end up turning the lesson into a fun time."* [T.6], *whereby instead of concentrating on what you have assigned them to do, they turn it into a discussion of irrelevant things."* [T.8].Studies by (Islam & Islam, 2012), (Bharathy, 2013), and (Ahmad & Rao, 2013) in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have also reported that classes are disrupted because role-play and other CLT approaches may turn to be chaotic. This is a teacher-related issue in failing to control and manage the class, and there in need for the teacher to emphasize on discipline. Teachers should ensure that students understand that role-playing is not all about fun; but its main purpose is educative in nature mainly to learn speaking skills. The teacher should make sure s/he controls the learners to avoid disruption of the class. This would ensure the achievement of lesson objectives as well.

"First, ensure that you emphasize on discipline because role-play is supposed to be entertaining…but make sure the entertainment is controlled so that by the end of the day, they still get something out of the activity…it shouldn't just be for entertainment only because if there is no educational benefit, there is no point of doing it in class." [T.3]

Another remedy cited by the teachers is by providing clear instructions and directions. They claimed that if the directions and instructions for the role-play are unclear, learners will do it wrongly, and in the end

the class becomes disorganized. Therefore, they claimed that teachers should make sure that before learners are engaged in any role-playing activity, they should be clear of what they are expected to do, how to do it as well as the objectives of the activity. One interviewee said, *"You tell them what to do first,…make sure they know what they are going to do. They should not just get surprised of what is expected of them."* [T.15]

Furthermore, respondents pointed out that even when learners are clear of what they are expected to do; still, it is important for the teacher to supervise or monitor the role-playing activity in progress. The teacher is there to check if the role-playing activity is being carried out according to objectives and if they are using language appropriately. One of the participants was quoted saying: *"...the teacher should move around to see what is happening."* [T.9]

The teachers further reported that preparedness on the part of the English teacher ensures that the speaking lesson in which a role-play activity is used should be successfully executed. Preparation starts with topic selection. The topic should be suitable for a role-play, interesting, and one which learners can find it easy to role-play because of its suitable language level; also, the teacher should avoid topics that are sensitive. Similary, (Mtunda & Safuli, 1986) recommend that preparation is fundamental to English teachers whenever they want to implement role-play method. Likewise, Riddel (2001) hints on teacher preparation by selecting topics with suitable language level and that are not too sensitive. The teachers expressed that:

"If you do not have much time during the preparation part of it, then it will become difficult when implementing it…….but if you prepare well, you will find out that it becomes easy to implement." [T.17]

"First of all, before going about with a role-play, make sure that the topic itself is appropriate for the role-play…to make sure that the topic doesn't end up being a flop." [T.10]

"You will find that you have lost direction if you're not fully prepared and because most of the teachers don't prepare thoroughly, they run away from using it…"[T.12]

Special Needs Students in an Inclusive Class:

Participants reported the problem of having special needs students in inclusive classes. This is a problem caused by the newly adopted inclusive education system in Malawi. Since role-play involves using oral communication in order to practice language in the classroom, it favors those students who are able to speak and hear properly. If some students have speech problems or they have hearing impairment, it will pose a challenge to English teachers on how to help them appropriately. A certain teacher said: *"This is a school where we are teaching some students who are deaf and dumb, so in the case of role-playing, it is effective where all students can hear and speak but where other students are not able to speak or hear, the method poses a challenge."* [T.7].

However, participants cited that, in such situations, English teachers should use sign language interpreters (S.L.Is), which is another challenge because they cannot be easily found. They said that learners with hearing impairment can be assisted by the use professional S.L.Is. These experts help deaf students to understand what the teacher intends them to do and how to do it. However, in many cases, S.L.Is are not enough to carter for every class where there are special needs learners. Therefore, it was also reported that an alternative way would be using fellow students as S.L.Is. One teacher said, *"They are supposed to follow us when we are going to class but this doesn't happen because they are very few, so we use fellow students to interpret what we are saying…we realize that these students are able to understand and follow whatever is being done in class."* [T.7].This will also make the disadvantaged students feel valued and motivated to participate in the lesson. (Fredrickson & Cline, 2002) have called this strategy 'peer tutoring', where learners can help each other in an inclusive class.

Interestingly, the teachers reported that they have learnt over time how to tailor instructions involving role-play to suit individual learners' needs including those with hearing impairment or speech difficulties. They mentioned that special needs language learners should be taken on board in a speaking lesson involving role-playing. They reported two ways how personalized instruction can be implemented. First is by giving a student who is deaf a part to play in the role-play activity as a deaf character. For this to be successful, in the first place they are communicated using S.L.Is on what is expected of them and how they can go about doing it which enable them participate easily. Their understanding is also reinforced with the help of fellow students taking part in the role-play who reinforce whatever is being said using gestures. In this case, the other students use verbal speech alongside gestures in order to help deaf students understand what is being said, and they eventually respond verbally if they are able to speak and if not, they only perform actions. Teachers also use another way to help these learners in a role-play

activity. They create 'silent drama' where only students who have hearing impairment and those with speech problems are involved. Initially, they are helped to understand what they are supposed to do and how to do it using sign language.

Time factor and large classes:

The respondents pointed out that role playing is time consuming. They reported that to prepare and implement a role-play activity, it requires more time which does not fit within the 40 minute periods in single shift schools and 35 or 30 minute periods in double shift schools. A role-play takes much time because both teachers and learners have to prepare for it, and effectively execute it in front of the class. The problem is more aggravated with the examination-oriented form of teaching which forces most teachers to focus on writing skills which is examined and ignore others. Therefore, since speaking as a language skill is not examined during national examinations in Malawi, teachers deem it unnecessary and time wasting. One teacher noted that: *"Lack of time…we realize that when we are role-playing, we are not teaching, so a lot of teachers find it time wasting, instead of just going straight to what is very important for exams purposes."*[T.15]. This has also been established in studies by (Kasumi, 2015), (Laili, 2015), (Farooq, 2015), (Mtunda & Safuli, 1986) and (Ahmad & Rao, 2013).

Teachers also reported that large or overcrowded classes pose a challenge in using role-playing to teach speaking skills. If there are more learners in class, it becomes difficult for the teacher to have enough time for each and every student to participate in the role-play activity within a single lesson. Problem of large classes is common in many education systems globally, as many countries equally face high teacher-pupil ratio as the same is also reported in South Africa (Bansilal & Rosenberg, 2011). This makes only a few learners to be involved in the activity, and an assessment on the speaking ability of the class cannot be drawn from the few students that have been involved in the role-play. *"If the class is huge, I don't think we can have an impressive number of groups to perform…from that few, you cannot conclude that my teaching has been effective." [T.18]*. Similarly, (Bharathy, 2013) observes that it is more difficult to implement and assess performance of learners engaged in role-play when learners are many in the class or when it is overcrowded. This shows that classes ought to be small for a role-play to be effectively harnessed in a speaking lesson (Laili, 2015); (Kasumi, 2015).

However, as a remedy for this challenge, it will be helpful if English language teachers employ rotational method in assigning roles to learners in a role-play activity. Individual learners to perform can be picked randomly and then rotate them. Moreover, learners can be divided into language groups and the teacher can rotate the groups to perform the role-play activity. With time, all learners or at least all groups will be given a chance to take part in a role-play activity. This will increase learner participation and in the process, improving their speaking skills since they will be given opportunities to practice language in the classroom. One interviewee said, *"When doing role-play, what I do is, I just arrange them in pairs or groups and then give them different roles…I alternate the groups."* [T.14].Moreover, thorough preparation is equally useful in order to avoid situations where a role-play consumes a lot of time. One teacher reported that if English Language teachers prepare well, they can time all the activities including role-playing, and they will realize that no time is wasted. *"At the end of the lesson, all the prepared work can be covered if it was well prepared. Preparedness will start from choosing a role play activity that will fit in with the time available."* [T.11].

Persistent Learner Inhibition:

Even though role-playing acts as a mask for inhibited learners to express themselves freely, still, others are not helped by it in as far as learner persistent inhibition is concerned. Respondents said that persistent inhibited learners are reluctant to speak in class and more likely to experience nervousness when participating in role-playing activities. However, these learners should be motivated to participate in role-playing language activities. According to the participants, one way would be talking to them personally and encouraging them to participate because nobody knows everything. "*…I was encouraging them to speak, and they became better off in terms of speaking skills,…with motivation, I have seen them improving."* [T.18].Through motivation given to the inhibited learners, they can be assisted to participate in role-plays and in the process, help them attain communicative competence and English language in general (Brown, 2001).

CONCLUSION:

The study has observed that role-playing method is one of the most effective methods English teachers can utilize in teaching speaking skills. It has been reported from the experienced teachers in Malawi that role-playing provides a platform for the acquisition of registers, real life language situations and removal of learner inhibition. When these conditions are available, speaking skills such as tone, intonation, fluency, and the use of gestures are developed in learners. However, it is weighed down by some challenges, which reduce its effectiveness, but teachers can turn things around by employing suggested mitigating strategies, which will result into paving way for learners to develop communicative competency. The study has noted that some problems are teacher based; others are caused by the education system while others are as a result of students, and in their totality L2 optimum development in communicative competence will be a far-fetched idea as most teachers will employ the method sparingly or ignoring it altogether.

We recommend that teachers must continuously think of what happens in classroom, and think about alternative means of achieving teaching goals or aims. It is also worth to note that some of these methods encouraged in teacher training programs may not be applicable in day-to-day teaching sessions. However, as noted by Bansilal and Rosenberg (2011), the teachers need to bear in mind that the actual classroom practice one uses for a particular group of students on aparticular day with a particular topic can only be selected from the teacher's stock ofpedagogical content knowledge. However, different activities and methods used with different students may vary depending on the nature of the students one is dealing with. Therefore, in choosing which methods to use, the teacher must be cautions of the environment in which s/he is working in which will dictate better ways of selecting his/her choices of content and methods to use.

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