

Fifteen Concise Roleplays and How to Use Them

JOHN BARROWS and JAMES ZORN

In our small groups of from eight to ten students at the Amerika-Haus Stuttgart, our advancing students are often reticent about voicing their opinions, especially on controversial subjects. We have tried various methods of overcoming this handicap, including roleplays.

Some methods of role-playing stress a precise and lengthy definition of the roles; others rely on the students' ability to elaborate on a programmed dialogue either provided for them or written by the students themselves. While both of these approaches are viable, we have found neither wholly satisfactory. What we wanted was a way to involve the whole class, encourage the students to speak up without worrying about set patterns, get them to use their imaginations, and create an amusing atmosphere that would make them forget they were in the classroom. At the same time, we wanted the students to apply spontaneously the grammar they had already learned.

Our solution was the roleplays presented below. They originated as an answer to the specific question of how to activate students who have learned basic grammar structures but have not yet realized that speaking English is, after the groundwork has been laid, a matter of their own initiative and courage to speak up.

The roleplays have been designed so that they (1) can be presented within a few minutes, and (2) contain a minimum of advanced vocabulary items. We have defined the roles only minimally in order to allow the students to create their own characters freely, rather than merely impersonating ones

that have already been carefully detailed. Indeed, many of our roleplays are so simple that they can be presented by the teacher with just a few words written on the blackboard, without using a printed text.

Some useful guidelines

When using the roleplays below or when making up others, we have found it advisable to observe the following guidelines:

1. The conflict should be well defined. The information given should form an "open framework" in which the student's imagination reigns. No information should be given which could become an obstacle to spontaneous expression.
2. Groups that tend to be quiet should re-describe the conflict in their own words after reading or listening to the teacher's presentation of it.
3. Ask the individuals taking the roles questions about themselves before beginning. This warming-up activity can put a lot of color into the situation.
4. Write points for discussion on the board before the conflict begins. The group will almost always end up discussing different points, but it is often useful to be able to guide them back to an "agenda" in case the argumentation comes to a halt.
5. The conflict can be conveniently started by having the student who has a moderating role—such as the mayor

or committee chairperson—welcome the participants to the meeting.

6. Once the conflict is under way, the teacher should blend into the background, allowing the students to go their own way, intervening only if there is a lull and the students need a new impulse. When the teacher does intervene, he or she should do so only *in propria persona*—as a character in the roleplay, not as a teacher.

Our roleplays put a certain burden of creativity on the teacher as well as the students. As is so often the case, the teacher of larger classes will have to adapt the roleplays to meet his or her needs. We would also advise that the roleplays be changed wherever possible in order to make them a part of the local atmosphere; for example, where the roleplay calls for “mayor” or “reporter,” it is often very helpful to replace these with local personalities (according to the dictates of good taste), such as the mayor of the city where the students live, or the name of a local newspaper.

How to use roleplays

Roleplays are not for all classroom sessions. Ours are most successful when used in conjunction with usual classroom materials such as guided conversations, grammatical exercises, and written texts. The average length of each roleplay, from introduction to finish, is about thirty minutes. This allows the teacher to use them as an alternative to the regular classroom routine, and to create an enjoyable instructional atmosphere for both teacher and students. We have found that most groups need one or two sessions to get used to the idea of roleplays, but once they are accustomed to them, it is surprising how latent theatrical abilities are revealed—in other words, how the students “ham it up.” For this reason, we suggest beginning with some of the simpler roleplays, such as “Club of Crime,” “The Land Decision,” or “Cavepeople.”

We hope that other instructors will have as much success as we have had with these roleplays in creating a free, conversational atmosphere in the classroom.

FIFTEEN ROLEPLAYS

FELLSWOOP AIRLINES, FLIGHT 13

The class is on board Flight 13 of the famous Fellswoop Airlines, flying from Houston, Texas, to Tokyo.

– A family of seven people are on board. They suddenly find that they have lost their tickets and passports. The crew wants to have some identification from them.

– A ping-pong team is on board. They want to practice table tennis in the aisle. The crew has to convince them not to.

– The passengers have just had lunch, which was a sweet

roll and a cup of coffee. They are still hungry and want more food.

– The passengers see that one engine of the plane is on fire. The crew has to convince them that this is not unusual and that there is nothing to worry about.

– Several passengers have seen two men in the back of the plane with a box that ticks and a violin case. The crew should find out what is in the box and the case.

CAVEPEOPLE!

Half the class is a group of cavemen and cavewomen. Some traveling salespeople come and want to sell them the following items:

- a life-insurance policy
- an electric can opener
- a swimming pool
- a refrigerator
- an automatic garage door

The cavepeople want to think about:

- What is it?
- How can we use it?
- How many should we buy?
- How much should we pay?

(Cavepeople use rocks for money)

Salespeople, don't forget your job! A good salesman never quits!

THE CLUB OF CRIME

We are a group of criminals who have formed a Club of Crime. Our purpose is to exchange tips, techniques, and experiences.

Present at our meeting tonight are:

- a bank robber
- a pickpocket
- a car thief
- a burglar
- a dishonest politician
- a shoplifter

Each member should tell his name and profession, and then discuss the following questions:

- Who are your favorite customers?
- What are your favorite working hours?
- What is the best “job” you have ever done?
- What was your training for this profession?

Coffee and cookies will be served after the meeting.

THE LAND DECISION

There is a piece of land in the center of this city which has nothing on it. The City Council has called a meeting in order

to decide what to do with this land.

Present at tonight's meeting are:

- the mayor of the city
- the director of the Department of Finance
- the director of the Department of Health
- an automobile-club representative
- an ecologist
- a married couple with children
- an apartment-house owner

Some suggestions before the committee are:

- build new government office-space
- build a new bank
- build a new hospital
- make a parking lot
- make a park
- build a playground for children
- build a new apartment house

The mayor will mediate the meeting as the committee discusses each suggestion.

THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY

A group of city dwellers and a group of country dwellers have met to discuss the merits of living in the city and of living in the country.

Present are:

- a man who lives in the country but drives 40 kilometers to his job in the city each day
- two young people who have bought a farm and moved from the city to the country
- an old farmer who has lived in the country all his life
- a married couple who live in the country and have two children
- a factory worker in the city
- a university professor
- a young executive and his wife
- a married couple who live in the city and have one child

The group wants to talk about:

- What are the advantages of living in the city? in the country?
- What are the disadvantages of living in the city? in the country?
- What are the differences between city people and country people?
- How can the best of both worlds be found?

AT THE RITZ HOTEL

A group of athletes has just finished their stay in San Jose,

California, where they were training for the next Summer Olympics. They are now checking out of their hotel, the famous Ritz.

Unfortunately, the athletes and the hotel management disagree about the bill. The athletes think the price per double per night (40 dollars) is too high, especially since they have the following complaints:

- The water wasn't warm.
- The beds were never made.
- One color television didn't work.
- There wasn't any soap in any of the bathrooms.

However, the Ritz management feels the price is right, especially since two towels and three drinking glasses are missing. Also, two of the athletes have already left San Jose without paying.

The management and the athletes want to discuss:

- What is the sport of each athlete?
- Why did the athletes choose to come to San Jose and to the Ritz?
- Why are the prices at the Ritz so high?
- What kind of guests usually stay at the Ritz?
- How can they reach an agreement on the price?

Both sides should consider:

- the shortcomings of the hotel
- the missing glasses, towels, and guests
- the reputation of the Ritz and of Olympic athletes

THE HITCHHIKING HASSLE

Mr. Sam Snuggle and his family have met on a chilly fall evening to discuss a vacation trip that Susie, his sixteen-year-old daughter, wants permission to take: hitchhiking from Baltimore, their hometown, to New York City. Her boyfriend, Bill Bland, wants to accompany her. Sam wants to discuss the plan with the whole family before giving his approval.

They want to talk about:

- Why do Susie and Bill want to hitchhike to New York?
- They are both broke. Will the family finance the trip?
- Wouldn't a different mode of transportation be better?
- Is there any way for the family to know if Susie and Bill are safe?
- Should Sam set a time limit for the trip?

Present at the Snuggle home tonight are:

- Susie Snuggle and Bill Bland
- Sam and Sally Snuggle, Susie's parents
- Mr. and Mrs. Bland, Bill's conservative grandparents
- Cathy Snuggle, Susie's younger sister, who

(111)

thinks that Susie is *always* allowed to do what she wants

- Bicks Blackwell, Susie's uncle, a member of a religious cult that believes in total freedom of the individual
- Eloise Eleesher, a friend of the family who is a policewoman
- some friends of Bill and Susie who hitchhike all the time

THE SMOKERS' COMMITTEE

A group of citizens have met to discuss a new proposal which will ban all tobacco smoking in restaurants, public offices, on city streets, and in automobiles. The proposal will effectively limit smoking to the private home.

Present at the meeting are:

- an 85-year-old man who claims to have smoked heavily for 70 years
- a medical doctor who is also a pipe smoker
- a representative of the anti-smoking group who put forward the proposal
- a middle-aged jogging fanatic
- a tobacco farmer
- a heavily smoking lawyer
- several sets of parents with small children
- a representative of the National Health Office

The group wants to discuss:

- Is the proposal enforceable?
- What are the rights of smokers?
- What are the rights of nonsmokers?
- How can the proposal be changed so that both sides agree?

There will be a ten-minute cigarette break after the first hour, during which the smokers will meet in the hall.

ROBOTS

Half of the class is a group of unemployed robots who are trying to find work.

They are:

- a robot cook
- a robot secretary
- a robot politician
- an intelligent robot dog who also tutors children

The prospective employers (a housewife, a businessman, some voters, and a family) want to know:

- What are the advantages of a robot over a human?
- What was your last job and why did you leave it?
- How much will we have to pay you?
- What happens if you break down?

The robots are concerned about getting enough oil and having free time for their hobbies.

THE OFFICE MEETING

Susie Sweet is a salesperson in a big department store in New York. She has told her boss that she wants a raise. Her boss doesn't know her work well, so he has decided to have a meeting to discuss the raise with Susie, the other employees, and some other people.

They are talking about:

- how often she is late for work
- how efficient she is
- if she is helpful to the other employees
- if she does everything her boss says
- if she really needs the raise
- when she had her last raise
- if she is nice to her customers
- if she likes her job
- how often she misses work

Present today at the office meeting are:

- Mr. Jones, Susie's boss
- Carol Candy, Susie's best friend at work
- Sally Sour, Susie's enemy at work
- Jim Bloat, who works in the Men's Department and adores Susie
- Bill Buck, a new employee whom Sally has helped with his work
- Betty Blah, a salesperson who is bored at the meeting
- Sam Hanks, a satisfied customer of Susie's
- Nora Middling, a dissatisfied customer
- Martin Sweet, Susie's husband, who is at the meeting by chance
- Sugar Sweet, Susie's daughter
- Susie Sweet

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL AND HIS WONDERFUL TELEPHONE

The year is 1892. Alexander Graham Bell and his assistant, Watson, have just invented the telephone and want to sell their new idea. Watson has been able to arrange a meeting to talk about the future of the invention with some important people.

They are talking about:

- What is this strange gadget and what does it do?
- Could the telephone be of use to business?
- Could it be of advantage to the private household?
- Should the national telephone system be oper-

112

- ated by private industry or national monopoly?
- Will it be possible to install telephones on the street for public use?
- Is the telephone dangerous? Should it be outlawed?

Present at this meeting are:

- Alexander Graham Bell
- Watson
- several housewives
- representatives of the United States Government
- representatives of Sparks Electric, a progressive company that produces wire and batteries

G.B. THROWITAWAY

An inventor, Mr. G.B. Throwitaway, has developed a way of producing throw-away shoes made of paper. He has come together with the board of directors of Pulp Paper Company, and he wants to sell his new idea to them *at all costs*.

The board is especially interested in the following:

- Will people consider the shoes stylish?
- Is there really a market for the shoes?
- Does "throwing away" really mean wasting or saving natural resources?
- What preliminary steps should be taken before a decision is made by the company?

Besides Mr. Throwitaway and the board members, two people who have tried the shoes are present. One is very satisfied, the other is dissatisfied.

RAMONA RAINTREE AND THE ANTI-TERROR SQUAD

Ramona Raintree wants to work for the anti-terror squad of a large United States city. She considers herself to be totally qualified for the job as a brown belt in judo, an honors graduate in criminology from a renowned university, and a dynamic woman. Although she was refused for the squad last year, she has been able to use her connections with the city government and bring the problem before a city council meeting.

The following people are present at the meeting:

- the mayor, George S. Fieldsweep
- several city councilpeople
- the commander of the anti-terror squad, Horatio S. Clutching
- several members of the squad, including a sharpshooter, an electronics expert, several ex-Marines, a munitions expert, and specialists in disguising techniques (all male)
- several feminists

- two representatives of the press
- Ramona and her lawyer, J. John McIntire

The following points are on the agenda for the meeting:

- Why was Ms. Raintree not accepted for the squad last year?
- Why does Ms. Raintree think she is qualified?
- A description of the job by squad members
- Are the hiring practices of the squad discriminatory or necessary?
- Can some compromise be found between the squad and Ms. Raintree?

THE AMERICAN BUTTERFLY-COLLECTING CLUB

The members of the American Butterfly-Collecting Club, in Trenton, New Jersey, have saved their nickels and dimes for several years in order to take a butterfly-collecting trip that is somewhat out of the ordinary. They know that they have enough money to travel outside the North American continent, but they still don't know exactly where they want to go. They have decided to go to a travel agency to get some good advice on a trip they could take. In their negotiations with the travel agency, the club members are, of course, interested in getting as much for their money as they can. The travel agents are, of course, delighted to get such a large group of people who want to travel to a distant country, and they want to get the club president's signature on paper as soon as possible.

Both sides will now try to decide how to solve the following problems:

- What will the club's destination be?
- What time of year will they go and how long will they stay?
- What kind of accommodations will they have?
- How much will the trip cost altogether?
- The travel agency will give the club an idea of what their daily routine on the trip will be.

TELEVISION TRAUMAS

Harry Harbinger, a young executive, comes home one evening and tells his wife, Jetta, that he has decided to sell their color television and not buy a new one. The reason? Harry and Jetta have a two-year-old son, and Harry doesn't want his child's mind "ruined" by TV. Jetta disagrees.

Present in the Harbinger home this evening are:

- Harry and Jetta Harbinger
- Betty and Bob Fried, some friends who work for the local TV station. Bob produces the news, and Betty writes the station's children's show

- Jack Trades, a TV repairman who is there working on the Harbinger's TV set
- Ollie Rowdy, their neighbor from across the hall. Ollie is unemployed and spends most of his time watching TV
- Roberta Rowdy, Ollie's wife, a waitress who works nights
- Harper and Ann Row, their neighbors from downstairs. Harper teaches English literature, and Ann is an actress at the local theater
- Mrs. Ellie Harbinger, Harry's 80-year-old grand-

mother. Ellie remembers the "good old days" before TV

The Harbingers and their friends are talking about:

- What will be gained if the Harbingers give up their TV?
- What will be lost?
- Can a compromise between Harry and Jetta be found?
- How could TV itself be improved so that this problem doesn't arise in other homes? □

This article appeared in the January 1983 issue of the English Teaching Forum.

(114)