

## **Role-Playing Adventures: Engaging Integrated-Skills Activities**

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A role-playing adventure (RPA) is a game-like, problem-solving set of activities that culminates with the accomplishment of a mission or objective. RPAs are task-based activities in which students use the target language to reach proposed goals by tapping into all the language resources available to them. Although the main focus is on speaking, an RPA is an integrated-skills activity because students end up using all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

### **What Is a Role-Playing Adventure?**

In RPAs, students are players, and their main objective is to come up with ideas to overcome several hurdles as they try to accomplish their mission. The teacher takes on the role of game-master. As game-master, the teacher controls the development of the story and rolls the dice, determining whether solutions presented by students will be effective in overcoming obstacles. The teacher's focus is on observing and helping students use and/or learn language they need to reach these goals.

Behind each RPA there is a storyline that provides students with an objective and teachers with a framework for steering students in the direction they want. In this article, we will use the beginning of one of our RPA storylines ("Derailed Train") as an example of how teachers can develop activities.

### **Role-Playing Adventure: Derailed Train**

In this RPA storyline, students are involved in a train accident. They will need to survive the accident, help other passengers, and catch a terrorist. To use this activity with different levels and ages, simply adapt the storyline and picture cards for suitability. Due to space limitations, we will present here only the scenario where they need to survive the accident.

#### **What You Need**

For this RPA, you will need:

- one or two 6-sided dice
- picture cards for the following objects: an ice pack, saw, sling, car jack, bandages, blood pressure gauge, blanket, crowbar, pain-killer, alcohol, plier, gun, hammer, a mirror, adhesive tape, tweezers, a stretcher, nails, gloves, scissors, stretcher, soldering iron, lighter, rope, screwdriver, thermometer, ladder, insulating tape, crutches, vodka, shovel, wheelchair, power drill, diapers, wire, and sleeping bag. (Make sure you have enough cards for each student to have one.)

#### **Step 1**

Begin the RPA by telling students they will participate in a very exciting adventure. Place the picture cards on a table and have each student choose one item and then have them explain why

they have chosen it. Encourage them to come up with as many possible uses for their object as they can.

## **Step 2**

After students have chosen their items, ask if they have travelled by train before. What kind of train was it? Did they enjoy the trip? What did they notice in their passenger cars?

## **Step 3**

Tell them that they are on a train moving across the countryside. Ask students to describe their passenger car. You could also have them draw the layout of the train and present it.

## **Step 4**

Say (use your own words): *You see a very strange, suspicious-looking man. What does he look like? What is he doing? Why does he look suspicious?*

Together as a group, have students describe this man. Make sure to ask them if they notice any special features such as a scar or a tattoo.

## **Step 5**

Say: *The suspicious-looking man gets up and leaves your car. Suddenly, you hear a loud screech and a really loud noise! The train starts bumping like crazy! What do you do?*

With the whole group, discuss their answers.

## **Step 6**

Say: *When the train finally stops, you look around. You are all safe. You are the only ones in the passenger car. You try to get out, but the doors are stuck. You look out and you see water! There is water coming in from all sides! You need to get out as quickly as you can or you will all die! How are you going to get out? Which tools could you use? Is there an emergency exit?*

Ask the students to suggest a plan. Review the items they have.

## **Step 7**

As the students suggest their plans, roll the dice. Tell them the dice will decide what their odds are. For example, if students say they are going to use the crowbar to open the door, tell them that the plan will only be successful if they get a 6. If they don't get a 6, ask them to improve their plan by adding something else (we will break a window), and roll the dice again. (*If you get 5 or 6, your plan will be successful.*) And so on. As they improve their plan, improve the odds. (Set the odds however you like; you can change them to make the groups go back to the drawing board and think of other solutions to the task, or just to add more fun to the activity.)

When they present a successful plan, challenge them again by saying, for example: *When you open the door (or break the windows), water will gush in. How can you make sure you don't get pushed back in by the force of the water?*

They will eventually be successful with this task. Be prepared for a lot of cheering on the part of the students.

### **Other Possible Scenarios for the Derailed Train RPA**

- Students rescue injured passengers in other passenger cars.
- Students conduct first aid on injured passengers.
- Students describe their surroundings (e.g., if there are abandoned houses nearby, farms, a river, a road, a gas station, etc.).
- Police arrive and students describe a suspicious man.
- Students help police locate suspicious man.

### **Tips for Successful RPAs**

Here are some ideas that have worked for us when using RPAs:

- Begin the RPA by inviting your students to create a new personality for themselves—a second identity. Ask them questions to help them create their identity. (E.g., Where are you from? Where do you live? Do you have any special skills?) This will allow them to be more inventive and give themselves various abilities and skills. Have them introduce their new identity to their classmates.
- Do one task per class. This way, teachers can invite students to retell what happened during the preceding class and revisit the new vocabulary and/or structures that came up. In our school, we have three 1-hour classes per week, and we use the RPA for 10 to 15 minutes at the end of the class. The RPAs usually take 2 to 3 months to finish.
- You may ask your students keep a journal of the adventure. You may also develop a dictionary, with students contributing definitions, sample sentences, drawings, and so forth.
- Depending on your students' level of English, a task may take more time. You will need to give them more time to prepare for each task and provide more support through recast and help with vocabulary.
- There are several situations where you might invite a speaker (e.g., to talk about first-aid) or ask a student to research a topic and give a presentation (e.g., how to make an SOS sign using smoke). You can also use short texts to complement a topic (e.g., a text on Morse code and the SOS sign).
- Dice, aside from determining the outcome of a plan, can be used for almost anything. Some examples:

- Determining quantities (e.g., 1 = 100 to 6 = 600)
- Answering a yes/no question (e.g., Do you have matches? An even roll of the dice = no; an odd roll = yes)
- Deciding whether students found something (1 = no; 2 = a spring; 3 = a stream, etc.)

We have used RPAs in our school since 1997, and they have yielded fun classes with lots of laughter, engaged students, long-term recall of new vocabulary and structures, and better and faster language acquisition.

Try using one. You will also have a lot of fun. If you would like the complete “Derailed Train” adventure, feel free to email us at: [glassschool@hotmail.com](mailto:glassschool@hotmail.com)

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**Thiago Bomfim** went to Glass School as a student. He later became a teacher there and is now one of the owners. Thiago was trained by Daisy and has used and developed some Role-Playing Adventure storylines.

**Maria Glass** was first trained as an EFL teacher by her sister, Daisy Glass, in Brazil about 30 years ago. Since then, Maria has obtained a master’s in applied linguistics and a PhD in linguistics. Maria now lives in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and is a full-time faculty member in the School of English as a Second Language at George Brown College. Maria has used some Role-Playing Adventures in her classes.

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