

THE USE OF ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS OF THE FIRST YEAR ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF KHANH HOA

Nguyen Thi Anh Chi
University of Khanh Hoa

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 21/02/2023 Revised: 23/3/2023 Published: 23/3/2023	The present study aims to investigate the use of role-play activities to enhance speaking skills of the first-year English major students at University of Khanh Hoa. An 8-week study was carried out and 30 first-year students of the English Linguistic class A at University of Khanh Hoa received role-play's implementation in their speaking class. The research data were collected through questionnaires to all participants and classroom observation of the two students. The findings of the study indicate that most of the students came to admit the benefits of role-play in speaking lesson as it is an interesting, beneficial, effective and innovative activity. Particularly, the study results show many positive signs of learners' improvement of their speaking skills. Furthermore, through the research, the author has found interesting speaking topics for their students as well as their difficulties and then has given some recommendations to improve the role-play activity in the classroom.
KEYWORDS English major students Role-play activity Task-based learning Teaching speaking Improving speaking skills	

SỬ DỤNG HOẠT ĐỘNG ĐÓNG VAI NHẪM PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG NÓI CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ NĂM 1 TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KHÁNH HOÀ

Nguyễn Thị Anh Chi
Trường Đại học Khánh Hòa

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 21/02/2023 Ngày hoàn thiện: 23/3/2023 Ngày đăng: 23/3/2023	Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu việc sử dụng các hoạt động đóng vai để nâng cao khả năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành tại trường Đại học Khánh Hòa. Một nghiên cứu kéo dài 8 tuần đã được thực hiện và 30 sinh viên năm thứ nhất của lớp Ngôn ngữ Anh A tại trường Đại học Khánh Hòa đã được ứng dụng hoạt động đóng vai trong lớp nói. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi và việc quan sát hai sinh viên trong lớp học nói. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng hầu hết sinh viên thừa nhận lợi ích của đóng vai trong giờ học nói vì đây là một hoạt động thú vị, bổ ích, hiệu quả và sáng tạo. Đặc biệt, kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy nhiều dấu hiệu tích cực về sự cải thiện kỹ năng nói của người học. Hơn nữa, thông qua nghiên cứu, tác giả đã tìm ra các chủ đề thú vị dành cho hoạt động nói của sinh viên cũng như những khó khăn và đã đưa ra những đề xuất để cải thiện hoạt động đóng vai trong lớp học.
TỪ KHÓA Sinh viên tiếng Anh chuyên ngữ Hoạt động đóng vai Học theo nhiệm vụ Dạy nói Phát triển kỹ năng nói	

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Email: nguyenthianhchi@ukh.edu.vn

<http://jst.tnu.edu.vn>

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Email: jst@tnu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

Speaking has become a vital part of our daily activities. According to Indramawan [1], speaking is the process of interaction between a speaker and listener that involves thought and emotion. To produce a good speech, the speaker has the ability to use the right words in the context with correct pronunciation, function, as well as appropriate speech, voice, and delivery. Therefore, teaching speaking is especially difficult due to such fundamental requirements for making a good speech.

There are many researchers proposing ways to teach speaking skills. Dorathy & Mahalakshmi [2] stated that “task-based language teaching is probably the most promising and productive one” in the field of language teaching. Through the task-based approach, students can learn real-life language in the particular context that facilitates second language acquisition. Additionally, students’ motivation is likely to be developed. To teachers, they are able to see the development of students’ communicative ability through these learning tasks. Therefore, they suggested role-play activity - one of the most effective task-based learning activities to animate learning and teaching atmosphere. It is defined as the projection in real life situations with social activities in which students play different roles in a particular language scene to solve the language problems they may encounter, and use of language movement, facial expressions and other means to act out what happened in that scene. They also stated that this task-based activity is not a simple fun game but a communicatively interactive activity in the classroom so the learners are of the center of learning and role-play is the center task.

In Asian context and particularly in Vietnamese context, a lot of researchers have applied role-play activity in their recent researches and their investigations uncovered noteworthy results of this activity.

Ahmada and Munawaroh [3], Nilmah et al. [4] and Gusmuliana et al. [5] employed role-play in their universities and gained enormous benefits of role-play in their classrooms. They found that role-play technique could significantly improve the students’ pronunciation and fluency problems in speaking skills. Role-play has really helped their students to be more active in expressing their opinions naturally. Furthermore, they enjoyed speaking through role-play tasks by making dialogue freely and felt more confident in their speaking performance.

Islam and Islam [6] – two other Asian researchers - gained similar benefits of role-play by employing it in their university in Bangladesh. After their 3-month implementation of role-play in the speaking classes, the results showed learners’ enhancement in speaking skills through role-play and they had more abilities to speak logically and confidently in the classroom because of it challenges of learners’ creativity and ability to think critically. The two researchers ultimately assert this type of activity is a very valuable method to help learners communicate effectively and offer them more opportunities to practise the target language in the real-life context.

What is more, Khanadin [7] conducted a study using role-play into his speaking class in Indonesia with the aim to solve learners’ problems of low speaking ability, low participation in learning English and teacher’s problems of using monotonous and inappropriate teaching techniques. The research found that the students got more involved in the role-play activities and they felt more confident and removed their shyness. Finally, Khanadin came to the conclusion that role-play is an interesting technique that could improve students’ active participation and better their speaking skills.

Noticeably, taking the considerable advantages of role-play in language teaching and learning, Pham Thi Song Thuyet [8] and Phan Thi Tuyet Van et al. [9] tried out the brilliant idea of applying role-play in their universities in Vietnamese context. Although role-play was carried out with the two groups of participants, the two studies reported the similar results. They all stressed that role-play is one of the effective teaching methods to enhance EFL students’ oral communication performance. Students have more opportunities to practice English in a relaxing and comfortable real-life environment; therefore, they are more interested and enthusiastic in participating in the activity.

It can be obviously seen that all of the previous researchers proved the effectiveness of role-play in English speaking classes at tertiary education. In Viet Nam, the idea of applying role-play is not recently new but this technique is not fully exploited. As a teacher of teaching speaking at college and facing speaking problems in the researcher's classroom, role-play is recognized as an important and effective activity in English speaking learning and teaching and it should be experimented in her speaking class.

To start with, an innovation was done during 8 weeks at University of Khanh Hoa and after that, an evaluation was done to find out the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perspectives on the benefits of role-play in the English speaking class?
2. What is the impact of the use of role-play on enhancing students' speaking skills?
3. What role-play topics and roles do students feel interested in most?
4. What difficulties do the students often face while role-play is employed in their speaking class and what are their suggestions to overcome the difficulties?

2. Research methodology

2.1. Participants

Thirty students in the English Linguistic class A took part in the innovation and study process. According to the placement test assessing all of the four skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing) at the beginning of the first semester, 60% of the students were at elementary level whereas the remainders were at pre-intermediate and intermediate level, marking 37% and 3% respectively.

2.2. Research instruments

2.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaires were administered to 30 students after the innovation finished at week 8. The questionnaires were designed in English and they included 5 questions about students' information, 13 Likert 4-point scale questions which were ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree about students' attitudes towards the benefits of role-play in their speaking class and three open-ended questions exploring their interests to role-play topics and their difficulties while the activity was conducted and their recommendations to overcome the difficulties.

2.2.2. Observation: Case Study

The case study was made for observing in order to "arrive at detail description and understanding of the entity" [10]. A checklist for observation consisting of 14 items was the researcher's own design which measures students' behaviors and their learning speaking skills ranging from never (0), seldom (1), sometimes (2) to frequently (3).

To implement the case study, two students (one male and one female) were randomly selected for being observed. Like other students, they formed a pair and performed 8 role-plays which were videos recorded for further feedback and evaluation. During the acting time, another student was asked to do the cameraman's job while the researcher observed the pair and completed the checklist for the two students. The purpose of doing observation was to evaluate students' improvements of speaking skills language accuracy (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), fluency, vocal expressions and interaction in 8 weeks.

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. Quantitative data

As for the questionnaires, a numerical coding scheme was implemented to transfer the information from the questionnaires into the coding sheet. The data were entered into a computer data file using a database management package Epidata 3.1. After that, all the data were imported into a statistical software package SPSS 16.0. Descriptive statistics technique was used to explore the frequencies and percentages of demographic of the sample.

Respecting the checklist in the case study conducted for evaluating the improvement of students' speaking skills within 8 weeks, descriptive statistic was also employed to calculate the score of each student acting one role-play each week. The possible ranging scores were from 0 to 30 points as the checklist was designed with 10 Likert 4-point scale items ranging from 0 (never), 1 (seldom), 2 (sometimes), and 3 (frequently). To illustrate students' speaking skills' promotion in 8 weeks, a bar chart was utilized. The higher score showed the respondents improved their speaking skills in 8 weeks.

2.3.2. Qualitative data

Regarding the qualitative data obtaining from the opened-ended questions, thematic analysis was utilized to examine single words and phrases to identifying the key themes within the data.

3. Findings and discussions

3.1. Students' views about the benefits of role-play in the English speaking class

It is obvious that role-play activities bring lots of benefits to language teaching and learning. Table 1 shows 13 benefits of role-play and students' perspectives on these in their speaking class.

Table 1. Students' perspectives on the benefits of role-play in their speaking class

Questions	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1. Role-play is interesting.	13	83	4	
2. Role-play helps to improve pronunciation.	7	67	26	
3. It helps to increase speaking fluency.	23	63	14	
4. It helps to enhance speaking accuracy (vocabulary and grammar).	20	80		
5. You have fun and are enjoyable with role-play.	25	75		
6. It is an easy method to communicate with others.	26	67	7	
7. Role-play can increase your participation and interest in learning speaking.	40	57	3	
8. It helps to overcome nervousness and anxiety.	13	67	20	
9. It gives an opportunity to express emotions freely.	13	67	10	10
10. The feedback after role-play helps to improve further.	27	63	10	
11. Role-play in groups is helpful as ideas can be shared.	17	83		
12. Role-play can build your confidence.	13	80	7	
13. It gives a scope to show innovation.	6	77	17	

As shown in table 1, over two-thirds of respondents agreed that role-play is beneficial to them in the speaking lessons and this activity gives a scope to show innovation in their learning speaking process (making up nearly 77%). Equally important, three-quarters (75%) claim that they have fun and are enjoyable with role-play activity. Four-fifths of them acknowledge that this activity can help them to increase their speaking accuracy and hence, they feel more confident while speaking in front of the class. Particularly, a very large majority which accounts for 83% confirm that role-play is interesting and helpful especially role-plays conducting in groups as they state that their ideas can be shared through these collaborative plays. These findings further support the idea of Islam and Islam [6]. They discovered in their study that that role-play helped to increase speaking fluency and accuracy of their students at University of Bangladesh (agreed by 70% of students). Due to the creative activity, the students became more confident enough to express themselves in the created real-life situations.

Another important finding is that more than a quarter of the students, 26%, reveal that the role-plays in the class cannot help them to improve their pronunciation. The possible explanation to this result may be due to the fact that 60% of students are at elementary level (based on the placement test including assessing their speaking skills at the beginning of the first semester).

Also, according to the placement test result, pronunciation was one of their worst. It is true that the poor linguistic competence, principally poor pronunciation is the biggest problem to learners.

3.2. The impact of role-play on enhancing students' speaking skills

The answer was discovered through classroom observation using a checklist. After the two students performed each role-play each week in class, each student was evaluated their speaking skills through 10 criteria in the 0-3 Likert scale checklist and at the same time, both of them received feedback from the teacher, along with positive and negative aspects of their performance. The final checklist results were presented by scores ranging from 0-30 points and described via Figure 1.

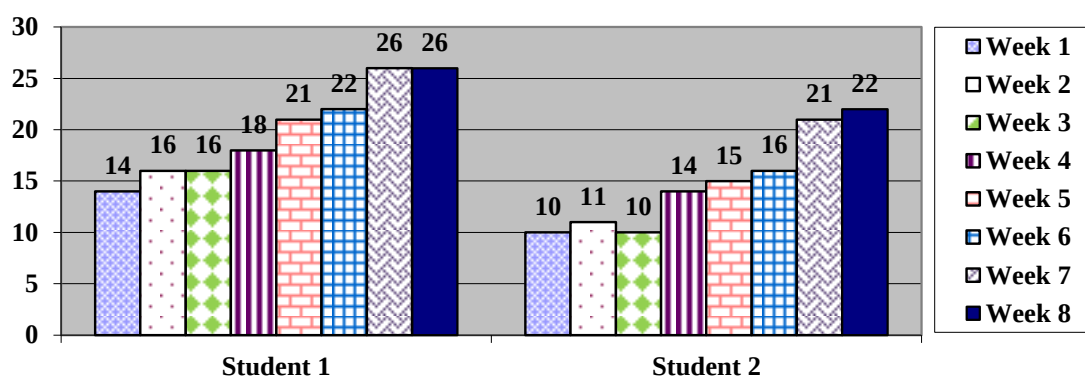


Figure 1. Speaking scores of two students while performing role-play during 8 weeks

Figure 1 indicates the speaking score of two students over the 8-week period through observation by the checklist. The scores were for measuring students' speaking skills in terms of fluency, accuracy (vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation), vocal expressions and interaction in the role-playing situations. Overall, it is easily recognized that the scores increase slightly from week 1 to week 8 including student 1 from 14 to 26 points and student 2 from 10 to 22 points. The possible reason may be due to the interesting role-play topics and the teacher's positive and negative feedback together with positive encouragement right after each performance that could help the students understood their strengths and weaknesses, so they could perform the other role-plays better.

Notably, the chart shows that student 1 achieves the higher score than student 2. The result can be explained by the reason that student 1 is at pre-intermediate level, more proficient in English than student 2 who is at elementary level (basing on the placement test result).

It is also interesting to note that in the third week, the score of student 1 remains stable; on the other hand, that of student 2 decreases slightly compared to the second week. It seems possible that the result is attributed to difficulty level of the third role-play topic and unfamiliar roles in this situation. The role-play in the third week is between the police officer and the victim with the communicative purposes of describing general appearance of the missing person. Of 8 role-plays, the third one might be the most difficult as being observed. Although students were provided with useful languages for describing people's appearance before they acted the play, their speaking fluency was not good. In addition, they didn't feel relaxed when playing the roles of the police officer and the victim; hence, they lost their confidence and active participation in the situation. Their explanation for these may be due to the fact political roles were not their favorite, chiefly the police officer's role (student 2's role); thus he probably made little connection and imagination of the police's job.

3.3. Role-play topics and roles students feel interested in most

When being asked about the role-play topics and roles that can excite their interest, the students agree that familiar role-play topics and roles in real-life situations are the most favored ones. They explain that topics for instance, talking about family, friends, leisure activities, shopping, games and famous people are suitable for their English level as the first-year students. They especially like to play the roles of parent with daughter or son, teacher with student, boy/girl with his/her boyfriend/girlfriend or actor/actress with singer/musician. They find it easier when taking these roles for the reason that such roles are accustomed to their everyday life so they can use simple and usual language, for example, talking about name, age and marital status to communicate effectively with their partner.

Apart from this, job-related role-play topics and roles are the preferable ones. Popular topics and roles like ordering food and drinks between waiter/waitress and customer; selling and buying things between salesperson and customer; or booking the hotel room between guest and receptionist are listed most as they state that these roles are extremely realistic and closely related to their occupation now and after graduation. Actually, even though their major is Primary Teacher of English, the students tend to choose to learn other roles linked to other jobs that can give them more working opportunities after graduation.

3.4. Students' difficulties while role-play is employed in their speaking class and their suggestions to overcome the difficulties

The questionnaire data showed that most students insisted that aside from benefits they obtained from role-play activities, they ran into the difficulties when role-plays were conducted in speaking class. The data showed that the subjective difficulty is the main difficulty blocking students from engaging in the role-playing situations. They affirmed that poor linguistic competence was their most difficulty while taking part in role-play activities. Remarkably, lacks of vocabulary and grammar were big obstacles for speaking. This caused their shyness and anxiety when speaking in front of the class, especially in front of the stronger and better peer who often dominated the conversation. The weaker students could not understand what their partners wanted to convey, therefore, they found it hard and unconfident to express the ideas correctly and appropriately in English. They added that the difference between English and their mother tongue-Vietnamese- was an important factor affecting their thought while speaking. This result is in agreement with Phan Thi Tuyet Van et al. [9]'s findings which reported that because of their students' limited vocabulary, they cannot express their ideas in English. This leads to the tendency of turning to equivalent Vietnamese for the hard English words. This fact is also similar to my students in my observation. The influence of the first language-Vietnamese- was retained in students' talk while they were speaking English. This influential factor is likely to end in the failure of the activity.

Besides, other objective difficulties were mentioned in their responses. They granted that they had little time to practise role-plays. Only having 5-10 minutes for each discussion of the role-playing situation was really difficult for them to do good preparation before the actual performance. What is more, uninteresting topics and roles made them become less involved and active in the speaking activity. Last but not least, they confessed that having little chance to be assigned to speak in front of the class and getting little feedback from the teacher were the disadvantages to students. This matches the reality. With the limited time (30 minutes) spending on one role-play each week, it is hard for the teacher to invite 30 students forming 15 pairs to act out their conversation and to give feedback to all the students at the same time.

To solve the difficulties, students hope to have more time for role-play rehearsal before staging the performance in front of the class. They also expect for more interesting, familiar and job-related role-play topics and roles remaining their favorite. For this reason, it is significant to the teacher to take students' ages, experiences, interests and needs into account when designing role-plays for them to practise speaking. Additionally, they are looking

forward to receiving more useful feedback and better support from the teacher before, during and after carrying out the activity.

4. Conclusion

After running procedure for a period of two months, the study generated north worthy results. According to the research findings, students have positive attitudes towards the benefits of role-play in the speaking class. It was considered as an interesting activity which could enhance learners' speaking accuracy and fluency as well as encourage their participation and motivation in a fun and enjoyable atmosphere of real-life situations. Most importantly, after a series of role-plays, they showed the remarkable enhancement in their speaking competence and they were found to be more fluent, accurate and confident while speaking in front of the class. This could draw the conclusion that role-play had positive impact on developing learners' speaking skills and enabled them to speak accurately and confidently using the target language in the appropriate situation. However, there existed some difficulties for students which could be attributed to potential problems needing to be deal with such as the poor linguistic competence, the use of Vietnamese in class, the passive participation of some weak students, the less involvement in uninteresting role-play situations, the noise in discussion time and non-cooperation between the student and his peer. Therefore, some recommendations are offered for teachers, students and administrators with the hope these will be taken into considerations.

For teachers, first, the well-prepared lesson plan is always necessary to contribute to the effectiveness of role-play activities. The teachers should be more flexible when choosing the role-play topics and roles that catch their interests. Second, while conducting the speaking activity, it is important to update and improve class management techniques through learning experiences from other colleagues and reference books of methodology. Assigning group leaders would be fitting to help the teacher in the discussing time. Third, grouping students with the same ability and level to assign the suitable tasks can produce a secure and less anxiety learning environment for the sake of making the students more confident, relaxed and active to enjoy speaking with their friends. Finally, the teachers should give clear instructions, helpful advice, intermediate feedback and positive encouragement; and praise are important factors to get students motivated, involved and participated in the role-play activities.

For students, they should be aware of the benefits of role-play in English learning speaking. This activity is not merely a fun game but really effective to enhance not only their speaking skills but also other skills. They also should have responsibility of the English learning. The more actively and voluntarily they join the class activity, the more knowledge and confidence they have to cope with the real-life situations they may encounter when they start their life after graduation. Furthermore, they are expected to use English to communicate in the speaking class. They should remove their shyness and anxiety to join role-play activities.

For administrators, forming smaller classes (about 20 students with the same level) is recommended to assist the teacher in their teaching and managing the class. Moreover, it is suggested that there should be more training courses for teachers of English to develop their English proficiency, teaching methods and classroom management skills. Last but not least, there is an urgent need of administrators' support for teaching aids and facilities such as overhead projectors, charts, visual aids, well-equipped and large classroom, reference books, etc. With such full support, the students would be more engaged in speaking lessons.

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