USING ROLE-PLAY TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' SPEAKING PROFICIENCY: PERCEPTION OF PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT HANOI UNIVERSITY

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TÓM TẮT:

Hoạt động đóng vai là một trong những phương pháp hiệu quả giúp nâng cao sự thành thạo trong kĩ năng nói cho sinh viên học tiếng Anh. Bài nghiên cứu này trình bày một nghiên cứu định lượng nhằm tìm hiểu nhận thức của 10 sinh viên dự bị đại học của Trường Đại học Hà Nội đối với việc áp dụng hoạt động đóng vai. Ba công cụ nghiên cứu được thực hiện bao gồm: nhật kí cảm nhận của sinh viên, quan sát của giáo viên, phỏng vấn. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy hoạt động đóng vai có ảnh hưởng tích cực tới sự thành thạo kĩ năng nói của sinh viên, đồng thời sinh viên cũng có những phản hồi tốt đối với hoạt động đóng vai.

Từ khóa: Hoạt động đóng vai, thái độ, sinh viên dự bị đại học.

ABSTRACT:

Role-play is one of the most effective approaches in promoting the speaking proficiency for EFL learners. This qualitative research is an attempt to investigate the perception of 10 pre-university students at Hanoi University towards role-play adoption. Three instruments were used to collect data namely Journal, Observation, and Interview. The results showed that role-play had good effects on the students' speaking proficiency, and the students had positive attitudes towards the application of role-play in their speaking class.

Key words: Role-play, perception, pre-university students.

1. Introduction

Out of four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), speaking seems to be of the most importance because when people know a language, they are usually referred to as speakers of that language [26].However, speaking is a complex process and thus is not an easy skill to perfect. In other words, it takes time and effort to practice this important skill before one can become a fluent speaker. In Vietnam, it is widely accepted that oral communicative competence of EFLlearners is far from expectation at the completion of university education [17]. For this reason, the challenge raised for a speaking lesson is to find activities and procedures so as to prepare students for managing spontaneous interaction. Among different approaches to address the problems of speaking skill, role-play has been considered as an effective learning approach in developing the oral communicative competence for ESL/EFL learners.

The definition of role play has been presented in a number of ways by different linguistics, researchers, and educators over the past decades. According to Errington, role play is "a planned learning activity designed to achieve educational activity" [5; 3]. What

he really meant is that this activity is not just fun or a game but isprepared carefully so that students can get something useful after they engage in a role. Sharing the similar idea, Mentsalso viewed role play as an educational and training technique which aims to supply the learners with a highly simplified reproduction of part of a real world or a structured system of competitive play that incorporates the material to be learnt [16]. He made this term clearer by separating its stems into different smaller parts so that readers would have a better look at it. To his view, a "role" actually derived from the word used to describe the part of actor in a drama, and then its concept is expanded to the way people behave in everyday life through their appearance and behavior. When the students "play" a "role" in the class for the educational and training purpose, they have to pay attention to themselves and their partners rather than the audiences like in a performance, then role players must feel, react, and behave as closely as possible to the way someone placed in that particular situation would do [16]. The points of view of these two writers seem to collide with what is defined in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary edited by Fowler [7]. In this book, the definition of role play is written as "behaving in accordance with specified function" and also has "educational function"[7; 547]. However, there is something different and new about the concept of role play in comparison with the two mentioned above that "role –play is a product of play, game, and simulation" [10; 3]. This means a learner has to perform a series of activity among three components, which seems to be a part of a drama or a play, at the same time, can be like a game for students to have fun, and finally a simulation in which learners might have a simulated equipment to perform their interaction together. The dictionary also raised the idea that the theory behind the use of role-play in teaching and learning English

is that learners are encouraged to be physically and intellectually involved in their lesson so that they can express themselves in a real communication context and have a better understanding of complex words or concepts. This third definition underpins the concept of role-play in the current study because it provides the readers with detailed information about role-play activity in the class and the process in which students take part in and get progress instead of just mentioning the abstract concept as two other prior definitionsdo.

There have been a bulk of research and theorizing on the use of role-play in language teaching, particularly the communicative competence among learners. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, three groups of advantage are presentedcarefully irst, this approach helps create oppor tunities for learners to practice interactional skill with others in specific contexts. When students take on variety of roles during role-plays, they will obtain spoken languages according to the settings, the degree of politeness or emotion and function required for particular role like persuasion, disagreement, and invitation [2, 8]. Besides, as the situations given to learners are based on real life so it is very useful for them to apply the skill outside classroom, and they can practice how to response spontaneously in real situations. Under the same vein, Mentsalso emphasized the powerful function of role play to let students put themselves in the situation they have never experienced before and at the same time put themselves in others' shoes [16]. Driscoll added by claiming that role-playing teaching method has been derived from the idea that knowledge is constructed by learners in their attempt to understand their experiences [4]. Similar message was forwarded by Poorman that integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject matter and understanding of course content [22]. After all these things, it can be

noted that role play gives students the chances to understand and interact in various contexts that happen in everyday life so the gap between training and real life may become closer and closer[1,14]. In the second place, not only does role play create chances for learners to interact but also encourage them to engage the tasks more actively. Analyzing this fact, Donnery et al., Pacyga, Read, and Umam pointed out that the atmosphere clearly becomes lively and comfortable in the classroom using role-play because students laugh, perform, and have fun while they get involved in the roles, instead of just sitting still and speaking out [3,18,25]. Asian learners in general and Vietnamese ones in particular often feel apprehensive when speaking out English in class so they tend to be passive and not engaged much in the lesson [24]. This is because they suffer from performance anxiety, low self- esteem, and consciousness of linguistic competence [24]. However, under role- play application, each student has a role to play at different difficulty levels depending on their competence, everyone in the class has something to perform and so can get involved in the activity together. Fogg found astudent involvement increase when role-play was used in his class which was earlier very boring and monotonous for them [6]. In addition, in this approach, students are not mere passive recipients of the instruction materials any more, but actively take part in the process of information exchange. Last but not least, Ladoussestated that role-play is especially useful for people especially those are weak or shy to be more confident since it provides them with a mask to face the difficulty and physical barrier during the interaction [12]. In other words, when students join the role performance, it is easy and convenient for them to express themselves, showing their hidden feeling and complex emotion, and get more confidence[16]. All of these studies have been conducted in different contexts and provided valuable insights into the practices of role-play; however, the main focus underpinning their study was on investigating the effects of role-play to language learners rather than the responses of language learners to this approach. Therefore, this study was implemented to fill such gap by exploring the perception of students towards role-play when it was adopted for six weeks in their speaking lessons. The findings of the current project might provide valuable information about the influences of role-play on the speaking proficiency of EFL learners as well as the experiences they had during the time of joining the project. With this in mind, the current work touches hence on three main following issues:

1, To investigate the effects of role-plays on the speaking proficiency of the pre-university students.

2, To investigate the perception of the pre-university students at IEC, Hanoi University towards the adoption of role-play in their speaking class.

3, To identify challenges facing students when implementing role-play program.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The subjects of the study, 10 pre-university students consisting of 7 females and 3 males were selected and asked to participate in the present project at the research context, i.e., International Education Center (IEC), Hanoi University. All of these students studied English to prepare for the IELTS examination to get at least 6.0 to be eligible for their study in La Trobe University's Offshore Programs in coordination with Hanoi University. The participants 'English proficiency level was at the lower intermediate level at the time this research project was conducted.

Normally, different skills are covered in their curriculum to develop the full basic knowledge of English. Regarding speaking

skill, every week they have one morning lesson taught by native English teachers, and two afternoon lessons taught by Vietnamese teachers. This research was carried out in every two afternoon lessons by Vietnamese researcher teacher.

2.1. Data collection and procedures

Qualitative methodology is employed to collect data since the main purpose of this research is understanding the perception, attitudes, and opinions of the pre-university students about the adoption of role-play. This methodology is very suitable for this situation as it is aimed to get findings and data that arise from real world settings [20]. Moreover, Hoepflstated that purposes of this methodology is to seek for "illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situation" [9; 48]. It can be inferred that by this methodology, information is obtained and knowledge is gained rather than measurement or rating the phenomenon by using numbers or counting. Three instruments were used to triangulate and to strengthen the reliability of the datanamely journal, observation, and interview.

Journal was the research method aiming at exploring information produced by students themselves. Every week, all class attendants were asked to write down on their notebook about what roles they were assigned to perform at class, how they finished the tasks, and how they felt about their own performance. Moreover, they were also required to note down common difficulties they encountered during the task. To make it clear and easy to follow, all of these factors were divided into four columns on the notebook pages with four tittles namely *"what roles"*, *"how to do"*, *"feelings"*, and *"difficulties"*. After six weeks, a set of 10 journal notebooks were collected and then analyzed properly.

Observation field noteswere utilized to collect the subjective data from the observer. During every speaking lesson, teacher researcher took notes of observation of students' performance and attitudes towards role-play activities. The teacher particularly gave comments of their involvement and facial expression because this could be considered as powerful evidences to justify what the students wrote in the journal or answered in the interview. The teacher had to write down and observe at the same time, thus, pictures, symbols, abbreviates were employed with the aim of saving time.

Individual interview with six key questions was carried out at week six after students got familiar with the innovation. Each conversation lasted about twenty minutes. With the use of digital recorder, the interviewer (teacher researcher) could focus on the answer of the students better without having to take any notes. All the interview questions were designed carefully and covered relevantly important issues of the innovation and research questions.

The data sets obtained from these methods were very useful to triangulate the key findings in this research. The teacher'sobservation notes and the students' journals were utilized to justify what they said in the interview. This is understandable because students could tell lies in the interview or could make up things in their journals to satisfy theteacher and to avoid losing face. With the notes written in the observation notebook, the teacher researcher could double check the data and clarify what she found in the data.

After collecting necessary data, open codes were used to process them. First of all, database of ten interview files recorded in the digital recorder was explored. A transcription of these files was implemented with full carefulness and effort so that key words could be recognized. Then, for each dataset, key words such as noun phrases which referred to individual tasks, verb phrases which stated actions as well as the students' performance, liking devices which

illustrated reasons and comparisons, adjectives that showed emotions and feelings, and symbols, icons were highlighted in different color blocks so that the process of axial coding got easier later on. As for the ethical issues related to the participants, all of the students were called with pseudonyms (Chanh, Cam, Tao, Dao, Na, Hong, Xoai, Nho, Mit, and Quyt).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The improvement in speaking proficiency

● *Vocabulary development*

In terms of language ability, though the capacity of using English vocabulary to interact with others in the assigned contexts was not concisely equal among ten students, there was a good sign of the improvement in vocabulary uses. This was well-documented in teacher' observation notes as follows.

"The note from 25/4/2015: Today, the roles were rather difficult in comparison with those in previous days so not all students performed well. However, a group of four students could manage to make a conversation with appropriate words, they were also very creative and imaginative when adding some interesting information and lengthening their speech..." (Teacher, obser)

This seems to be in line with what students responded in the interviews. Some of the respondents namely Na, Tao, Cam, Nho believed that the activities did help reinforce their vocabulary retention. They gained confidence in using vocabulary in interacting with others in different authentic situations. Nho explained her practices in more details.

"I learn many new words and know how to use them correctly in different situations because at the beginning of each lesson, teacher usually provided us with vocabulary related to the topic. During my performance, I and my friends used such words many times, which helped me remember the words properly" (Nho, jour)

Tao added his experiences:

"Before learning with role-play, there were some words that I did not know how to use correctly. Thanks to the role-play activities, I now can know many new words to talk with my cousin in Hong Kong..." (Tao, jour)

● *Comprehension*

Most of students in the class responded that they understood their task assigned by the teacher. Most of them knew the teacher's instruction, vocabulary and structure in the given role cards, and what role they had to play. This was reflected in the journals they handed in every week.

"Today, I am quite happy with my role because I receive good comment from teacher and friends. I understand my role because this is the situation I often fall in when I eat out in some foreign restaurants..." (Cam, jour)

"I and my partner tried to understand different directions, useful prepositions, and structures that my teacher taught us. Then I played my role using those things..." (Chanh, jour)

This was reflected objectively through the interviews. Six out of ten students could tell the interviewer the things they did in the role-play activities. The following excerpts from the interviews with Cam, Chanh, and Tao proved their comprehension of their roles in each specific situation.

"I acted as a customer complaining the bad food in a restaurant. The role is not really hard and I already encountered the similar situation in real life so it is a little bit easy for me to imagine and know what to say and express my opinion" (Tao, int)

"I knew what to say with the role of being a person asking the way to the nearest hotel. When my friend showed me the direction, I could understand what she was saying" (Chanh, int)

"Teacher assigned me to be a policeman who received the report about a robbery. This

was quite interesting. At first, I did not know what to say and act in such situation, but then I discussed with the members in the group before the performance so I had a lot of ideas…" (Cam, int)

3.2. The students' attitudes towards role-play adoption

● ***Engagement***

In almost all cases, the students got involved in the activities. When being asked to discuss and decide which words and structures were useful for the context, they seemed to do their tasks. Based on what the teacher observed in each lesson, the engagement was rather positive.

"The note on 6/4/2015:there were three groups, two with three people and one with four. They asked and answered questions, some took notes using color pens. In each group, there was an outstanding student who often talked more than the rest of group…" (Teacher, obser)

"Note on 17/4/2015: Today, I asked members to join their groups of three and four randomly. I gave them different role cards and gave them time to discuss and prepare their roles. They looked comfortable and excited to share their opinions with each other. Some people nodded their heads, spoke English to discuss enthusiastically. Others interrupted to reject the ideas. The class was very noisy with excitement…" (Teacher, obser)

However, it can be logically deduced that sometimes students did not pay much attention totheir tasks. In this light, may be they did not like the role or they did not understand the instruction of teacher.

"The note on 12/4/2015: students worked in group of four, read the guidelines from teacher. They used a lot of Vietnamese to exchange ideas. Five students used mobile phone to look up the words. Two others used mobile phone to play games and did not pay attention to the group leader…" (Teacher, obser)

● ***Confidence***

From the observation entries, most of students did their roles quitewell with confidence. They spoke loudly, some smiled at their partners. Some used body language naturally, even moving to be suitable with the context. Only two weakest students mumbled, spoke very slowly, and their faces got red.

On the other hand, there was also a good sign in their answers when being interviewed. Six students stated that role-play activities helped them gain confidence in the real life context because such activities resembled various situations that they meet in everyday life. Below are some comments from the participants

"I think this activity helps me become more confident in real life because I am going to study in Canada for some years… This prepared me with a lot of useful things. When I get there I will remember these situations and apply what teacher taught me to contact with Canadian people." (Na, jour)

"…it is good. I will be very confident and ready to interact with foreigners since now I know words and structures appropriate to some various common settings…" (Tao, jour)

"This technique was so interesting and useful. I will not be afraid of not finding words to say to foreigners in some situations. Now I am more confident than I used to be. (Mit, jour)

● ***Satisfaction***

In the interview, when the teacherasked them how they thought about the innovation, their feedback were very positive. 6 out of 10 interviewees felt happy and satisfied with the activities, they also commented that it was a chance for them to interact with other people in authentic situations as they can discuss, argue and act out. The satisfaction arose from the feeling of completing the task and achieving the seeable outcome, i.e. they could interact with other in English simultaneously. Some

comments showing the satisfaction of the learners were well documented as follows:

"I used to be like a dump person in the class because I hardly say anything in the speaking class. But now I am more engaged in the lesson by acting different roles with my friends. It is very interesting and useful for my speaking skill." (Na, int)

"I really want to talk with other people in English but I do not know what to say and how to lengthen the conversation with them. For example, when I meet a foreigner in the street, I really want to say something to him but I am afraid of speaking incorrectly. Thanks to the program learning with role-play, now I am more confident and ready to talk in English. This makes me very happy" (Tao, int)

"I felt very satisfied when I finished the role and receivedthe positive feedback from my teacher and friends. This motivates me to speak more" (Chanh, int)

3.3. Challenges in performing role-play activities

The most common challenge arose from the findings is vocabulary issue. Although the students were prepared with a range of vocabulary related to a specific topic at the beginning of every speaking lesson, this appeared to be insufficient for them to lengthen the conversations. Especially, with weak learners, the problem was more serious and affected their engagement and fluency. Xoai, Hong, and Nhoconfessed that they did not usually focus on their task in class because the activities were difficult for them to follow.

"... The situation was difficult, the words were new to me, a lot of things to remember. I asked my friends some new words but she did not know them. I feel tired, bored and did not want to attend the role. We chatted in Vietnamese for ten minutes about her new shoes..." (Xoai, jour)

"My most difficult issue is the limited vocabulary. I do not know enough words to express what I want to say even though I had a lot of things in my mind. Consequently, I asked my teacher a lot during my performance..." (Nho, int)

"To me, although this is a good methodbut I think my English proficiency is not high enough to finish the task as well as the teacher expects..." (Hong, int)

Another problem rooted from the cooperation and the harmony between members in each group, and with the whole class. Quyt revealed that:

"... I was excited to discuss with my friends about our task but then my partners were not so cooperative so I felt bored. We did not act so well in front of the class. I hope next time I would work with other people" (Quyt, jour)

"I am always too shy so I do not want to perform to the whole class. I knew how to say but this activity made me embarrassed and so I did not finish the task as well as expected." (Xoai, jour)

"When I saw many of my friends laugh, I thought I was doing something wrong and ridiculous. This affected negatively my performance..." (Hong, jour)

3.4 The summary of the research findings

The findings from three instruments indicate the positive effects of role-play on the pre-university students' speaking proficiency in terms of promoting comprehension and vocabulary retention. The data collected also reveals the positive attitudes of the students towards the adoption of role-play in their speaking class. Specifically, most of the students were engaged in the lesson and their roles during the experimental time. They also showed their satisfaction and confidence when participating in the projectof using role-play. However, there were a certain number of difficulties that inhibited the success of their role-play performance. The most commonchallenge recognized was related to

vocabulary. Another one is about the students' psychologywhen working with role-plays.

4. Limitations

Despite some positive results, the research project has several limitations that should be taken into consideration. First of all, the project of using role-play to promote pre-university students' speaking proficiency was short term, i.e. in 6 weeks, so the participants did not have enoughtime to be exposed tothe treatment. If the exposure time had beenlonger, they might have had more practices and their perception towards role-play might have been more detailed and reliable.

Another shortcoming lies in the methodology of the research. The study yields the findings about the effects of role-play on the students' speaking proficiency but no test or measurement were employed to judge such effects. If a quantitative instrument had been used in the study, it would have triangulated and strengthened the collected data.

5. Pedagogical implications of the study

This study has shed some lights on the application of role-play in enhancing the speaking proficiency for students, these may not only contribute to the improvement of the students' classroom performance but also to the teacher's professionalism. The first recommendation underpinned the research is that teachers should select the topics carefully for the course since this can put profound influences on the students' academic performance and motivation. Once the topics are chosen and presented in an attractive way, then it can help stimulate the interest of the learners. Besides, language teachers are recommended to provide learners with an enjoyable learning environment because when the students find the atmosphere enjoyable and

relaxing, they can feel freeand comfortable to act the roles with their friends without being shy or worried.What is more, language teachers are invited to be familiar with the application and deep understanding of role-play so that they can create effective lessons for learners.

The attitudes of the students towards any pedagogical approaches are very meaningful since this affects their engagement and progressduring the learning course. Therefore, their voices need to be acknowledged so that adaptions or changes can be made to meet their needs as well as to properly support them in their long-lived learning path.

6. Conclusion

This paper concentrates on the practical aspect of using role-play in teaching speaking skill and conducted a detailed research into the perception of a particular group of students towards role-play. It has covered three main points: The effects of role-play on the students' speaking skill, their attitudes towards the approach, and the challenges facing the learners. After investigating the data collected, it can be approved that the technique of using role-play to teach speaking for the pre-university students at International Education Center in Hanoi University was quitesuccessful. The approach helped promote the students' speaking proficiency in terms of comprehension and vocabulary uses in different specific contexts. These findings appear to be in line with other studies on the positive impacts of role-play on the communicative competence and language development. The study also revealed thepositiveattitudes and perception of the students towards role-play application since the approach engaged them in the activities, brought them the feeling of confidence and satisfaction. This is a good

sign in comparison with their bored feeling, uncooperative attitude and un-focusing on the lessons when they followed the common traditional teaching approach (i.e. just sitting in their seats and answering the teacher's questions). Despite the promising aspects of role-play, some of challenges in implementing the program of role-play were identified. This presents a diversity of challenges for researchers as well as EFL/ESL teachers.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions for students

1. What did you really do with role-play technique in the speaking lessons?

2. What were benefits of learning using situational role-plays?

3. What was your feeling when you was assigned a role card?

4. How did you feel when you receive a topic that you are not really familiar with?

5. Can you tell me some problems you encounter when you use situational role-plays to learn speaking skill, in terms of time management, level of difficulty, or psychological issue?

6. Can you give me some suggestion to make the use of situational role plays better in the future?

Appendix 2

Samples of role card.

Role play 1:

Role 1: You are a mother who is currently having a short holiday in a famous place. You phone home to ask your son if everything is still alright, and you also tell him your feeling about the trip.

Role 2: You are a son and you report your mother the situation at home. You also ask her about the trip she is taking.

Role play 2:

Role 1: You are visiting your friend in a far city but get lost. You phone her to ask the direction to her house.

Role 2: You have a friend visiting you. You answer her call and give her careful guidance to your house.

Role play 3:

Role 1: You invite your friend to eat out in a Thai restaurant. Ask him what he wants. Order the food, and lastly pay the bill.

Role 2: You are invited by your friend to a restaurant. Look at the menu and tell her what you would like to eat and drink.

Role 3: You are the waiter. Give the customers the menu, and suggest them the specialty of your restaurant. Take their order. Give them the bill.

Role play 4:

Role 1: You want to buy a new dress to join your sister's wedding. You go to the market with your best friend, choose and bargain the reasonable price with the shop assistant.

Role 2: You go with your friend to choose a new dress for her. Give your comments to different dresses, and advise her to buy the most suitable one in your opinion.

Role 3: You are the shop assistant, try to convince your customers to buy your products. Try to sell them with the price as high as possible.