

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

USING ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR LAW-MAJORS AT HANOI PROCURATORATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT: With a lot of advantages, role-play is considered one of the most potential activities to help students promote their speaking skills. As one of the first attempts to explore the application of using role-play in speaking classroom for a specific group of learners, this study sheds light on both the students and teachers' attitude towards using role-play, the difficulties they encounter as well as suggestions for utilizing this kind of activity effectively. A survey was conducted with 120 first-year law-majors and twenty teachers being involved. To enhance the quality of information collected from the questionnaire and help the researcher provide more details to the findings, interviews were employed. The study is of great use to those who want to find an effective way of using role-play to teach speaking skills and thanks to it, students will be more interested in learning speaking to gain a better result.

KEYWORDS: role-play; role-play activities; speaking skills; university; method.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is essential to have changes in teaching approach from traditional ones which put emphasis on the production of accurate grammatical sentences into Communicative Language Teaching approach which focuses on developing learners' communicative competence, i.e. the ability to communicate through language.

Considered an integral part of English learning, "communicative task" has been introduced at Hanoi Procuratorate University (HPU) but implementing it is not a simple work. Proper pedagogical tasks are of significance to the effectiveness of English course here. However, little research has been carried out on this topic. Hence, there exists a gap which the current study will be aimed at bridging.

The author conducted a study to gain more insight into the current situation of using classroom activities with a focus on role-play (RP) tasks and try to draw some implications for using role-play to improve speaking skills for 1st-year students at HPU. It is hoped that this study will lay a foundation on which subsequent research into this matter is based and developed.

2. Literature review

2.1. What is role-play?

In defining role play, Byrne (1986) gave comments that role play is a part of drama activity. In details, he described that there are three terms to cover the drama activities. They are mime (mimicry-memorization), role play and simulation. He distinguished the terms as follows: In *miming*, the participants perform actions without using words (although as we shall see, this activity leads naturally on to talk). In *role play*, participants interact in imaginary situations. *Simulation* involves role play as defined above.

Another definition is stated by Budden (2006) on British Council Teaching English (BBC) in her article with the title "Role Play". She said that role-play is any speaking activity when you either put yourself into somebody else's shoes, or when you stay in your own shoes but put yourself into an imaginary situation.

The writer views that role play is a technique which involves fantasy or imagination to be someone else or to be ourselves in a specific situation for a while, improvising dialogue and creating

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a real world in scenario. It aims at encouraging the students to think and create, lets students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively non-threatening setting, and can create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur.

2.2. Types of Role Play

Scripted Role Play: This type involves interpreting either the textbook dialogue or reading text in the form of speech. The main function of the text after all is to convey the meaning of language items in a memorably way.

Unscripted Role Play: In contrast, the situations of unscripted role play do not depend on textbooks. It is known as a free role-play or improvisation. The students themselves have to decide what language to use and how the conversation should develop. In order to do this activity, good preparation from teacher and students is really necessary.

2.3. Procedures in Using Role Play

House (1997) explained that there are several procedures in using role play:

- a. Students read and familiarize themselves with the (example) dialogue.
- b. Teacher divides the class in pairs, A and B, give A and B roles from the dialogues.
- c. Teacher lets students act out their role play, students should read it loudly.
- d. Teacher walks around correcting and checking students' work.
- e. Students swap roles and repeat, those who finish first can be asked to make up their own role play, using different words to fill the gaps.

The above procedures do not need to be used exactly. It is flexible; teacher can create or develop procedures which is appropriate and suitable with his/her own class.

2.4. Benefits of using Role Play activities

Improved Speaking Fluency: Regular practice with role plays can lead to improved speaking fluency. Students become more comfortable expressing themselves spontaneously in the target language, which is invaluable in real-world conversations.

Contextual Learning: Role plays create a contextual learning environment. Instead of just memorising isolated words or phrases, students learn how language functions in real-life communicative situations. This contextual understanding makes it easier for them to transfer their language skills to authentic, everyday interactions outside the classroom.

Constructive Feedback: These activities provide natural opportunities for error correction and supportive feedback. As students participate in the activity, a teacher or peer can provide immediate feedback on language use, pronunciation and grammar. This allows students to quickly learn from their mistakes and make improvements, contributing to language proficiency.

Enhanced Student Motivation: Role plays can be highly motivating for language learners. They add an element of fun and creativity to language classes, making learning enjoyable. When students are motivated, they are more likely to participate actively, practise more, and make progress in their language skills.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Setting of the study

The study was conducted at Hanoi Procuratorate University among first-year law-majors whose English competence is of mixed levels. The teachers' difficulty lies not only in helping students generate or organize ideas, but also in increasing their participation and motivating them to use English in speaking lessons. In order to provide students with opportunities to practice their speaking skill through communicative activities, the faculty chooses the course book *New Cutting Edge preintermediate* (Sarah Cunningham & Peter Moor) in which role-play activities play a significant part.

3.2. Participants

The subjects of the study consist of 120 first-year law-majors. They aged from 18 to 20, with 80.95% being female and 19.05% male with their mixed English levels. According to the survey, 76.19% have learnt English for over ten years, only 4.76% have learnt English for under five years, and the rest have five or ten years of experience learning English.

Twenty teachers were involved in the research. All of them have been teaching English for at least 5 years and have taught the target students for at least one year so they may provide objective and panoramic view of the situation. Most of them are young teachers who were trained in communicative approach while some others were trained in traditional approach. This may vary their responses to the questionnaires.

3.3. Data collection instruments

Questionnaire: Survey questionnaire was used in collecting data for the study. Three types of data including “behavioral”, “factual” and “attitudinal” which are easily obtained from questionnaires can provide the researcher with information to answer the research questions about the current situation of using role-play activities to enhance speaking skills of 1st-year HPU students.

Interview: The interview involved 10 students and 10 teachers only. Unlike the questionnaires, all open-ended questions were included in the interview schedules. Semi-structured type was chosen.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. *What is the current situation of using role-play activities to teach speaking to 1st-year students at HPU?*

More than half of students asked (62%) is familiar with role-play activities. None of them has never been introduced to such activities. While 30% of the students indicated that their teacher sometimes used role-play activities in speaking lesson, only 8% of them reported they had very few chances to take part in these activities. It can be said that role-play activities have been used at a quite high frequency at HPU, which indicates teachers’ awareness of the advantages of these activities in teaching speaking.

Table 1. *Students’ preference in being prepared for a role-play activity*

Expected teacher actions	Number of students	Percentage
Explain the purpose of the activity	115	96%
Provide students with background information on the topic	60	50%
Pre-teach necessary vocabularies and structures	76	63%
Prepare the teaching aids	100	83%

The above table shows that half of the students (60 students) wanted their teachers to provide them with background information on the topic whereas 63% of the students reported that before conducting a role-play activity, their teachers should supply them with vocabularies and structures needed for the activity. Besides, the majority of the students liked to be explained the purpose of the activity clearly (96%) and indicated that their teacher had better prepare the teaching aids for the activity. They claimed in the interview that:

“My teacher never uses any aids to support her teaching, which makes the lessons very boring.”

“She never outlines the purpose or objectives of the activity so we don’t know what we may gain from the role-playing.”

Table 2. How teachers give instructions to students

Ways of instruction	Number of teachers	Percentage
Give simple and clear instructions orally	20	100%
Write brief instructions on board	2	10%
Demonstrate by modeling	12	60%
Use video or cassette player	0	0%

Regarding the way teachers give instructions, 100% of them tried to explain rules in a simple, clear and explicit way to students. Over half of the teachers (12 teachers) often gave demonstration for students to follow. It is a good way because students will know exactly how they must perform the activity based on the model. Using video or cassette player is also a useful way; however, it seemed to be ignored by most of the teachers. They just put emphasis on how to explain the rules. Only 2 teachers chose to write brief instructions on board. They explained, *“With very weak students, oral instructions sometimes seem to be insufficient. To ensure their understanding, writing brief instructions on board is necessary.”*

Table 3. How teachers monitor the activity

Ways of monitoring the activity	Number of teachers	Percentage
Stay at teacher’s seat and ask for students’ participation	3	15%
Appoint a group leader to regulate participation	2	10%
Go round and help students with necessary clues	16	80%
Go round to check students’ performance and keep them on right track	17	85%

Almost all of the teachers (17 teachers) reported that in order to monitor the activity, they often went round to check students’ performance and kept them on the right track. Nearly the same number of teachers (16 teachers) claimed their help to students with necessary clues during the activity. In the interview, some of them said that: *“I often help weak students by giving them some clues so that they can keep pace with others”*.

“Checking to ensure students’ going on the right track can avoid any misunderstanding and student can fulfill their tasks in the right way”.

Appointing a group leader to regulate participation and staying at their seat and asking for students’ participation were not popular ways used by teachers to keep students taking part in the activities (used by 2 and 3 teachers respectively).

Table 4. Students’ preference in terms of teacher monitoring the activity

Ways of monitoring the activity	Number of students	Percentage
Staying at her seat and ask for students’ participation	3	2%
Appointing a group leader to regulate participation	13	11%
Going round to check and helping students with necessary clues	97	80%
Going round to check students’ performance and keeping them on the right track	100	83%

The table shows that almost all of the students (100 out of 120 students) preferred their teachers going round to check their performance and to see whether they were on the right track. Many of them (97 students) also liked the way the teachers helped students with necessary clues. However, very few students (only 3) wanted their teachers to stay at their seat and just ask for students' participation. They said, in the interview, that:

"She [their teacher] only stays at her desk, which makes me sometimes feel that she doesn't seem to be concerned if we are doing things right or wrong."

"I wonder how she knows whether we are on the right track or not if she only stays at her seat and asks for our participation."

"I want my teacher to go round and help weak students like me in stead of staying at her desk."

Only 11% of the students reported a group leader was needed to regulate the participation of the group. This may be due to the fact that role-play activities are often conducted under the form of pair work in speaking lessons, so a group leader may not be necessary.

Table 5. *How teachers encourage students to use English in the activity*

Ways of encouraging students to use English	Number of teachers	Percentage
Pre-teach necessary vocabularies and structures	11	55%
Set a rule of no Vietnamese during the activity	17	85%
Provide help in time	16	80%
Set appropriate goal for the activity	5	25%

Most of the teachers (17 teachers) required students not to use Vietnamese during the activity. It is understandable simply because it is a speaking lesson and using the target language to communicate in the class is a major objective. Nearly the same number of teachers was willing to provide help to students whenever needed. 11 out of 20 teachers chose to pre-teach necessary vocabularies and structures. In the interview, one of them said, *"providing vocabulary necessary for students to perform the task will help them to be more confident of communicating in the target language"*. Only five out of 20 teachers with more than 8 years of teaching experiences considered an appropriate goal for the activity as a tool to encourage students to use English in class. When asked, they claimed: *"Although setting appropriate goal for the activity is difficult and takes time, it helps to encourage students to use English because students are motivated to speak about what they are interested in"*.

Table 6. *Ways of correction*

Ways of correction	Number of teachers	Percentage
Encourage students' self-correction	2	10%
Use peer correction	4	20%
Provide teachers' own correction for all mistakes	0	0%
Provide teachers' own correction for serious mistakes only	18	90%

While providing their correction on serious mistakes was the most popular way used by most of the teachers (18 teachers), none of the teachers chose to provide their correction on all mistakes. It is simply because it takes too much time and teachers will have no time for other activities. Encouraging students' self-correction and using peer correction were also used but not the popular ways (used by 2 and 4 teachers respectively). Some teachers expressed their opinion in the interview as follows:

"I don't have much time. Therefore, in order to save time, I correct only serious mistakes".

"I think self-correction is the best way to correct students' mistakes because when students realize their own mistakes, they'll learn more from them."

Table 7. *Students' preference in having their mistakes corrected*

The way the teacher corrects students' mistakes	Number of students	Percentage
Teacher intervenes and provides correction as soon as students make mistakes	4	3%
Students' self-correction is encouraged	0	0%
Teachers correct each student's mistake	72	60%
Teachers correct common mistakes made by many students without mentioning who made them	90	75%

According to table 11, while 75% of students claimed that they wanted their teacher to correct common mistakes made by many students without mentioning who made them, teacher's correcting each students' mistakes was reported to be liked by 60% of the students. Besides, none of the students liked being encouraged to self-correct their mistakes. Only a few students (4 students) reported that when they made too serious mistakes, they needed their teacher to intervene and provide correction as soon as possible so that they could go on in the right way. When asked about their opinions on the teacher's way of correcting students' mistakes, some of them said that:

"I like the way that my teacher correct mistakes. She only corrects the common ones and she never mentions who made them. This way makes students maintain their face."

"Giving feedback while I am speaking makes me feel under pressure."

More than half of the students (62%) considered RP activities as a necessary tool of motivation to speak English. However, while 20% of the students thought that these activities played an important role in motivating them in speaking lessons, 10% said that role-play activities did not have much influence in creating their motivation. In addition, the number of students who highly appreciated role-play activities was relatively the same as ones who did not consider RP as a meaningful kind of motivation at all (5% and 3% respectively). This diverse statistics may result from students' various linguistic levels and their different interest in the topic.

4.1.2. What are the difficulties in using role-play activities to teach speaking skills to 1st-year law-majors at HPU?

Table 8. *Difficulties that students face in role-play activities*

Difficulties	Number of students	Percentage
Students' limited linguistic competence	117	98%
Partner's limited linguistic competence	106	88%
Lack of motivation	33	28%
Insufficient help from teachers	25	41%

According to the above table, the students really had problems in both their poor linguistic competence and their partners' limited ability, which prevented them from taking part in the activity successfully. Some of them said in the interview that: *"I really like the activity very much because it is very interesting; however, my ability made it difficult for me to express my ideas"* or *"I am quite excited with the role-play activities but I can just speak in Vietnamese. English? No way!"*

The lack of motivation and insufficient help from teachers were also some minor factors that caused the students difficulties in role-play activities. Some of them said that they felt discouraged because the teacher seemed to pay no attention to them.

Table 9. *Difficulties teachers encounter in conducting a role-play activity*

Difficulties	Number of teachers	Percentage
Choosing suitable activities	16	80%
Organizing the class	11	55%
Giving instructions	2	10%
Getting all students involved	20	100%
Encouraging students to use English in class	15	75%
Giving feedback	1	5%

All of the teachers agreed that involving all students in the activity and encouraging them to use English in class were major challenges in their speaking lesson. This seems to be the problems to all speaking classes in Vietnam. Besides, teachers also had difficulty in electing suitable activities and organizing the class (reported by 16 and 11 teachers respectively). The reason may lie in the fact that class size is somewhat large and students' language level varies. Therefore, selecting an activity which suits every student and organizing the class well are really a matter of concern. Encouraging students to use English in class is also a big problem. Meanwhile, giving instructions and giving feedback seemed not to cause difficulties to these teachers. Below are some opinions collected from the interviews:

"Sometimes students are interested in the activity but they use Vietnamese instead of English. This is out of my expectation".

"I always wonder how to involve every student in the activity because talkative students often dominate the class while inhibited students without teacher's help participate passively".

4.1.3. What are implications of making role-play activities successful in speaking class of 1st-year law-majors?

Table 10. *Students' expectations of teachers' roles in RP activities*

Students' expectations of teachers' roles in RP activities	Number of students	Percentage
Teacher provides students with necessary vocabularies and background knowledge about the topic	30	25%
Teacher gives clearer instructions	21	18%
Teacher chooses more suitable topics	75	63%
Teacher offers help during the activity	82	68%

According to the above table, over two-thirds of the students reported that they needed more help and support from the teacher during the activity whereas one-fourth of the students hoped their teacher would supply them with more vocabularies and background knowledge about the topic. This is understandable because students' limited competence calls for their teacher's help. In addition, clearer instructions and more suitable topics are also students' desire. These factors would make contribution to more successful activities. In the interview, some of them expressed that: *"I would be more motivated to use English if the topic is of my interest"* or *"Sometimes the activity is boring so I don't want to participate"*.

Table 11. *Teachers' expectations for effective role-play activities*

Teachers' expectations for effective role-play activities	Number of teachers	Percentage
Smaller class size	12	60%
Placement of students in groups of similar proficiency	15	75%

Diverse sources of teaching materials	11	55%
More students' participation	20	100%

The table above shows that all of the teachers are looking for more students' participation in role-play activities. They considered students' participation in these activities as one important factor that would make the implementation of role-play activities in speaking class more successful. Besides, 75% of the teachers thought that students should be placed in groups of similar proficiency while more than half of the teachers hoped for smaller English class size. They complained in the interview that: *"Too many students in a class made it difficult for me to organize the activity and I cannot have control over all the students."* Moreover, it can be seen that the shortage of teaching materials is also one problem for the teachers. They hoped for more support from the authority for better teaching condition.

4.2. Discussion

The paper has served as a thorough study on the current situation of using role-play activities in improving speaking skills of first-year law-majored students at HPU. It also reveals teachers and students' attitude towards role-play as well as their difficulties and preference in the application process. Based on those findings, pedagogical implications have been suggested for more effective role-play activities.

Firstly, role-play activities have been used quite widely and frequently at HPU and both teachers and students have positive attitude towards using role-play activities to improve speaking skills. Students also have good comments on teachers' work. However, there is still a small gap between teachers' practice and students' expectations in the implementation of role-play activities.

Secondly, in using role-play activities, teachers and students have their own difficulties. Students' limited linguistic level is the biggest problem for them to take part in role-play activities successfully whereas teachers consider class size and students' various levels two main causes of their difficulty in involving all students in role-play.

Thirdly, teachers expect for more students' participation, their positive response to role-play and the administrators' actions to make smaller classes with students of the same level. In addition, students expect for more teachers' assistance during the activity which may give a helping hand to their limited ability and gradually improve their linguistic competence.

Role-play activities have an important place in the language classroom. They stimulate learners to manipulate their foreign-language skills and linguistic knowledge to the full. Role-play activities are also user-friendly for the teacher to recycle previously taught information. Sometimes RP activity is time consuming, but it is an investment well worth the effort.

5. Implications

5.1. Implications for English teachers

The researcher would like to suggest some implications for English teacher. Role-play requires well-organized teaching materials, the teacher should be well-prepared before conducting the role-play activity. The teacher should choose the appropriate topics that are suitable to the students' ability as well as the language functions that have been mastered by the students. During the implementation of role-play technique, the teacher should help actively students to solve their problems. While students practiced with role-play, the class became little bit noisy, the teacher should be patient. Moreover, the teacher should walk around class to prevent students from using mother tongue a lot. Besides, the teacher should manage time efficiently and effectively since role-play sometimes takes much time. Finally, the teacher should make sure that the students have fully understood and have the information they need.

5.2. Implications for administrators

To assist teachers in their teaching, administrators are recommended to form smaller classes and place students of same level into one class. These would create more teachers' efficiency in their jobs.

Besides, it is suggested that administrators should frequently organize training courses for teachers to improve their English proficiency, teaching methodology and management skills. In these courses, teachers can exchange knowledge and experience with each other.

Furthermore, teaching conditions and teaching aids should be among administrators' support. If the classrooms are well-equipped and teachers are supplied with various and interesting teaching materials, students will be more excited to participate in the lessons.

5.3. Implications for students

The most important thing to deal with students is that they should be made aware of the benefits of communicative activities in general and role-play activities in particular. Once they consider studying languages for communication, they will have intrinsic motivation to use the target language instead of mother tongue.

In addition, students should realize that it is them who should be responsible for their English learning. Instead of being passive in the class, they are expected to join all the activities conducted by teachers voluntarily and actively.

Students should be made aware of the benefits of role - play activities

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study covers all the theories considered as the background for the research. The study also finds that students and teachers have positive attitudes towards using role-play activities. Secondly, the study shows students' problems using role-play activities. Finally, some suggestions are given to make role-play activities more effective in an ELT class. It can be said that role-play is a successful technique in improve students' oral communication. For further study, it is suggested some research possibilities. One project would be conducting similar studies with different levels and other schools, particularly with high levels of proficiency. In addition, further studies should explore the use of other kinds of role-play with different group of learners. For example, with students who have advanced level, the researcher can apply role-playing in the form of debate or discussion or roleplaying controlled through situations and goals. Furthermore, there does not seem to be much research on using role-play with other skills; listening or reading skill.

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**Sử dụng các hoạt động đóng vai để cải thiện kỹ năng nói
của sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành Luật tại Trường Đại học Kiểm sát Hà Nội**

Tóm tắt: Với rất nhiều ưu điểm, đóng vai được đánh giá là một trong những hoạt động tiềm năng nhất giúp học sinh phát huy kỹ năng nói. Trong nỗ lực tìm hiểu ứng dụng phương pháp đóng vai trong lớp học nói cho một nhóm người học cụ thể, nghiên cứu này đã làm sáng tỏ thái độ của cả sinh viên và giáo viên đối với việc sử dụng phương pháp đóng vai, những khó khăn họ gặp phải cũng như gợi ý để sử dụng loại hoạt động này một cách hiệu quả. Một cuộc khảo sát đã được thực hiện với sự tham gia của 120 sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành luật và 20 giáo viên. Thông tin được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn. Nghiên cứu rất có ích cho những ai mong muốn tìm ra phương pháp sử dụng phương pháp đóng vai trong dạy kỹ năng nói một cách hiệu quả và nhờ đó sinh viên sẽ hứng thú hơn với việc học nói để đạt được kết quả tốt hơn.

Từ khóa: đóng vai; các hoạt động đóng vai; kỹ năng nói; đại học; phương pháp.