APPLYING ROLE-PLAY IN EFL CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates findings from a case study of applying role-play in EFL classroom. Role-play in this paper does not refer to the traditional model; it is the variations of role-play when students are exposed to authentic situations inside and outside class based on the task-based approach. This is a small cohort of around 16 first year students about seven weeks. Qualitative approach is employed. Previous researchers' theories about applying role-play worldwide have been displayed in the case when students overcome their fears, challenges and put more their efforts in speaking English with their peers in the class accuracy, fluency and confidently. In other words, through role-play application, students prove themselves in dealing with the uncertainty water of context changes when they communicate in English in actual situations as well as in their long life learning experience. Core factors contributing to students' speaking achievement are students' effort and motivation being recognized by role-play. The others could rely on their ability of conducting their speaking competence. This case concludes that role-play should be applied in EFL classroom in the context of Vietnam.

Keywords: role-play, task-based approach.

TÓM TẮT

Ứng dụng kỹ thuật cho sinh viên đóng vai vào lớp học tiếng Anh: nghiên cứu trường hợp

Nhằm nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp Tiếng Anh của sinh viên sau khi tốt nghiệp nghiên cứu này đã vận dụng kỹ thuật cho sinh viên đóng vai theo mô hình mới vào lớp học Tiếng Anh. Với phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính trong phạm vi nghiên cứu trường hợp,nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra việc ứng dụng "đóng vai" dựa vào những tình huống thực tiễn không những giúp sinh viên tự tin hơn khi giao tiếp bằng Tiếng Anh mà còn giúp sinh viên có khả năng giao tiếp chính xác và lưu loát hơn trong những bối cảnh giao tiếp thực tiễn. Nghiên cứu này được tiến hành trong thời gian 7 tuần với sự tham gia của 16 sinh viên năm thứ nhất người Việt Nam. Thông qua phỏng vấn và quan sát, kết quả thu được là đại bộ phận sinh viên giao tiếp tự tin, chính xác và lưu loát hơn sau khi tham gia vào nghiên cứu. Kết luận cho thấy rằng kỹ thuật đóng vai theo mô hình mới nên được áp dụng trong các lớp dạy Tiếng Anh giao tiếp.

Từ khoá: đóng vai, cách tiếp cận.

1. Introduction

Social interaction is essential in second language learning. In the context of Vietnam, which belongs to Kachru's (2005) expanding circle in which English is spoken as a foreign language, social interaction in the English language is not commonly seen in daily life; it often happens in English classrooms. Recently, there have been remarks by Ha (2008), Vu (2007), and Giang (2011) that Vietnamese graduates cannot use English upon graduation. Other reasons are that they have not had their adequate social interaction in the English language in English classrooms. As indicated in English language teaching (ELT) literature, one of the effective ways to have English learners involved in classroom interaction is the application of role- play. However, little has been known and reported about the application of role-play in Vietnam. It is discussed that most Vietnamese students are not able to speak English in real life situations after graduating from Universities. The difficulties which Vietnamese students encounter coming from various reasons: (1) the lack of English communicative environment in universities, (2) the gaps between English learning and English approach, (3) the influence of culture in practicing English and (4) the strategies Vietnamese society and Vietnamese educational managers use to evaluate teachers and students in English teaching and learning. These four factors impact on the result of teaching and learning and are considered as barriers when a written of writing and reading test is believed to be a unique measurement tool to evaluate students language's ability Hong (2006). Thus, this paper aims to seek the full images of the application of role-play in EFL classroom in a University in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam.

2. Literature review

Role-play is described as a unique teaching method in EFL which has been noted by the following worldwide researchers:

Halleck's (2007) study contributes to a new perspective about how to look at interaction and helps redefine what interaction is. Interaction, according to Halleck, can occur within a single interlocutor. This new perspective reinforces the importance of language learners' cognition in their language learning. Thus, there is need for studies on interaction and cognition happening in language learners' mind.

*The findings that application of role-play can increase language learner's speaking ability (*Aliakbrari and Jamalvandi, 2010*) and motivate language learners' interests in speaking (Liu, 2010) are not new in ELT literature. However, little has been known about the effects of role play in the context of Vietnam.*

Vasileiou and Paraskeva's (2010) study is useful because it finds that role-play can serves as "a catalytic factor" to engage and to inspire learner interest and effort, increase the attractiveness of learning activities, increase learning value, and provide a common reason to foster co-operation and "team spirit" to support learners in achieving their knowledge and skills.

The benefits of role play in language

teaching and learning found in Magos and Politi's (2008) and Ong's (2011) studies need to be supplemented since their findings are   based on learners' opinions only. The benefits of role-play can be expanded when investigating both language learners' and language teachers' perceptions or cognition about role-play.

In Strick's (2008) study and also Halapi and Saunder's (2002), role-play is considered as a training tool and an intelligent method to support teachers to overcome the difficulties in inspiring learners in language teaching and learning. In Vietnam's context, where English is seen as a foreign language (a context in which language learners have few chances for English practice outside of the classroom), role-play needs to be more employed in the classroom. Accordingly, more studies need to look into the effects of role-play in Vietnam's context.

Yun (2008) investigated the application of role-play with learners at various ages. The finding that the older the learners were, the more interested they were in role-play, may be true in the countries in North America, but not true in Vietnam, a country in Asia, where second language learners are much influenced by Confucianism in which language learners often keep silent. Thus, there is a need for further studies on application of role-play with language learners at different ages in the Asian context.

After reviewing the above researches, some issues from Halleck's (2007) study with the finding that interaction happening within a single interlocutor in a form of monologic discourse is more effective than dialogic one is quite new, and this finding

needs to be further studied so that it can be reinforced. Also, Aliakrari and Jamalvandi's (2010) finding explains that the application of role-play in a Task-based approach can enhance EFL participants' oral ability. In the context of Vietnam, task-based language teaching, though widely known in ELT literature, is quite new, meaning most Vietnamese language teachers are not aware of it. Thus, there is need for teacher training to help them know about this approach. Accordingly, further studies on the application of role-play in this approach, particularly in the context of Vietnam, can be conducted.

Moreover, one interesting comparative research direction, application of role-play with students at various levels (e.g., schools/ pre-schools, and elementary schools), has not been found and reported by any research conducted in Vietnam. Thus, Vietnamese researchers can conduct comparative studies on the application of role-play at different educational levels such as primary, secondary, high school, and tertiary. Yun's (2008) finding that older students are active in role play needs to be reinforced by further studies. And the limitation in Halapi and Saunder's (2002) study is that the picture of the dimensions of application of role play is not fully depicted given the participants were influenced by the contextual factors like economic conditions, salary situation, and political pressure of prestige. This limitation indicates that there is need for further studies on the influence of contextual conditions on the application of role play.

Referring to the gaps mentioned above,

the most concerning questions need to be certified are:

(1)To what extent is role- play applied together with a task-based language teaching approach in Vietnam?

(2)What benefits does role-play contribute to English language learning in EFL class in the contexts of Vietnam?

(3)What is the influence of context on the application of role-play in EFL class in Vietnam?

3. Research methodology
3.1. Pilot study

In this pilot study, only four participants in evening English class participated in this one month pilot and they were not rehearsed and instructed carefully before participating in their field trips as well as making their own report after each trip to evaluate what had they learnt from their trips. That is the reason why they met lots of challenges during their field trips. Also, it is analyzed that the student in the study felt intimidated by the presence of the teacher sitting nearby observing her and by the pressure when dealing with unexpected situations while conversing with foreign customers. In addition, the findings from the pilot study were just based on a student's point of view and the researcher's subjective evaluation. Because of this fact, teacher-researcher keeps conducting a main study.

3.2. Main study

Norris (2006) cited in Modal (2011) explained that the need of evaluation of the existence of the language teaching, the effect of education and the improvement of program particularly made sense in

"education landscape". Language teacher has a variety of individual perspectives in their teaching job, they daily put themselves insight the job to reflect their teaching strategy. This reflection, it is needed to evaluate the challenges which have been accessed in the pilot study. The objective of the study was to figure out the strength and the weaknesses of the methods which were applied in the study were suitable with the case of English speaking teaching in the context in Vietnam.

After studying methodologies and methods of above articles, I realize that almost researchers refer applying qualitative than quantitative method in their research. Six articles use a qualitative method whereas only two others apply a quantitative one in their research (See the Appendix). In the book named" The New Language of Qualitative Method" issued by The Oxford University Press, F. Gubrium and A. Holstein concluded that "In recent years scholars and researchers in all disciplines have moved away from traditional quantitative methods of research to more qualitative methods which emphasize questions of meaning and interpretation" (p.256). They added that qualitative method provided a new cognitive opinion focusing on the various perspectives of social life's status together with the acknowledgment of research procedure in order to convey real contexts. This concludes that qualitative method is the most appropriate choice in doing a case study research.

This inspired the researcher that qualitative is a core option for conducting case study. F. Gubrium and A. Holstein,

the authors of "The New Language of Qualitative Method" issued by The Oxford University Press expressed that researchers recently had changes in using quantitative for qualitative because of it's approach could contribute a new cognition in a wide range of social's life's status together with the achievements of researcher for the purpose of conveying real context. This means that to gain a deeper significant research, qualitative is the high recommended. Learning from the foregoing researchers, qualitative (Questionnaire, Observation and Interview) was employed in this case for the researcher own experience.

A questionnaire was administered to the student after the midterm test instead of after the final test as planed in the proposal innovation because of the limited time. Another questionnaire was administered to a reception manager of the hotel (See Appendix). These questionnaires centered on the advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of role-play together with a task-based approach. The reason Questionnaire was chosen was that it could provide the objective answers about my students' random opinion, even its responses sometimes did not focus on the main purpose of the question.

Besides questionnaires, as the description above, classroom observations were carried out by the teacher, also the researcher, and the hotel receptionist. Both of them were in charge of providing the students with language input in relation to a particular task the students were supposed to learn and practice. Afterwards, both of them took turn role-play with the students as an example. While one was

role-playing, the other is observing the class. At the time when the students practiced role-play on their own, both of the teacher and the receptionist observed the whole class as well as circulate it to provide help when needed. What was observed has been recorded on a notebook and with the support of a cameraman who recorded what was happening in the classroom. The recordings as well as the notes would be analyzed later.

The other factor here is because of the limited time, in stead of waiting until the last week of the semester as planed in the innovation the students were sent to some particular hotels for real practice. At these hotels, the receptionist worked with the students in the classroom that observed the students' role-play with customers in real situations. To make the students feel comfortable and less threatened in the real practice, I did not take part in the observation task as I did in the pilot study. What the receptionist did while observing was taken notes and afterwards reported to me. All the reports would be discussed and analyzed by both of them later in the data analyzing and interpreting phase.

In order to have a full image of the application of role-play, group interviews were conducted with the students for dual purpose: (1) to clarify what they have written in the questionnaire and (2) to delve into their feelings and attitudes towards the role-play practice in class and in the hotels. Some interviews were also conducted with the hotel manager to get his/ her feedback on the students' role-play practice in his/ her hotel.

To overcome these problems, the participant participated in the study

contained (1) the students of a class of hospitality (16 students), (2) the teacher in charge, (3) a representative sent to class by a hotel, and (4) a hotel manager. The students were those who learnt to practice performing tasks in hospitality, particularly those often done in a hotel. Both the teacher and the representative acted as teachers providing them with language input and as customer's role playing with the students in practicing particular tasks. Last, a hotel manager who permitted the students to have practice sessions in his/ her hotel observed the students performing tasks and evaluated their performance. Involving all the stakeholders – students, teacher, a hotel receptionist, and a hotel manager – provided objective evaluation and helped me avoid biased interpretations.

The university where the study was conducted was not a high – ranking University in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam and the hotel where the students would have real role-play practice was the PA Hotel in district No1, Ho Chi Minh City. The reason for choosing these two places was that the stakeholders here welcomed the researcher and were enthusiastic about the researcher's study, and were willing to support the study.

Duration of the study

Invitation letters were sent to state-holder (Hotel manager and University) and students to ask for the permission. Due to the limited time, the study was conducted in 7 weeks compared to 15 weeks as planed. This amount of time was acceptable to carry out the many necessary activities such as having students practice in class, getting feedback from the hotel

receptionist, getting feedback from the hotel manager through a questionnaire and interviews. In the study, the effect of the application of role-play in a simulated situation on students' motivation to speak would be addressed.

Teacher's role

Learning from the "pilot study" the teacher observed the students at a distance and analyzed that student felt intimidated by the teacher's presence and stressful when encountering difficulties in conversing with foreigners. Because of this, in this study, the researcher had took two roles – both as the teacher and teacher in role as the customer – with additional support from a hotel representative acting as a customer also.

4. Finding and data analysis
4.1. Data analysis

The data were sorted through the following tentative questions: (appendix 2)

Students' ability in their linguistic approach (English approach) could be demonstrated in various ways: (1) English communication, (2) Interaction, (3) Accent, (4) Grammar, (5) Words and (6) Language transition. These 6 listed points required students to construct their knowledge and apply English in real life situations accurately and fluently by their daily evaluation themselves. Students could or could not approach their English basing on their English knowledge together with their ability to deal with occurring situations while they communicated in English, their English approach progressed. For the purpose of increasing students' English ability, the cognition about the difference between English communicative

approach and English competence of student was verified through the appliance of role-play with task-base in this paper because the researcher here was directly involved in this study. Students, themselves could correct and improve their English Speaking skills to be suitable with students' values of learning style. Instead of repeating or learning by heart passively in an English speaking lesson, students took action with interactive activities. These activities would access student knowledge relating to the other factors: social contexts where students could join or individual contexts where students learnt (in my class) to meet the target uses.

The challenges of English learning environment in class could impact on students' English speaking ability, when teacher changed classroom atmospheres by role-play activities, their students became more creative and interested in learning of English speaking. The combination between activities in classroom and in field trips in a social context was the connection between learning theory and practice. This did not only build up student's innovation, but also apply real context to raise students' English approached performance. From real life situations, students could study themselves to overcome their language barriers. Then they acknowledged clarifying their motivations in learning English speaking in class and their English communication in real life was favorable in this study.

Students' intrinsic motivation is understood as the factors insight students (Students' background, psychological and natural characters) which could motivate students to learn English speaking.

Whereas, extrinsic motivation was understood as the factors (teacher, classrooms environment, classroom facilities, course works and another social factors) outside which could influence or impact on students' learning English speaking from the source of data by the implementation of questionnaire, interview and observation.

4.2. Findings of the study
Question number one:

The effects of role-play in simulated situations implemented in conjunction with a task-based approach on my students' English speaking skills were reviewed after they had seven weeks of observed and practice in role-play at the hotel and in my class. Having my students observed at hotel over four weeks, the students felt interested and very confident when they came to my English class. The nervousness I did see in my students in my pilot study had gone replaced by a more relaxed feeling and my students absolutely put themselves wholeheartedly in to the English class. Some students with the limited ability in their English speaking, tried to talk sometimes more in class even they had to use bilingual language with teacher's or friend's support. This expressed that the finding of Halleck (2007) about the effect of use of role-play together with Task- based approach worked well in my case in the context of Vietnam.

Question number two:

My students' English speaking skill improved because they had enough time to experience in practicing in class and observing at the hotel. The effect of role-

playing on students' English communication skills helped students perform 'naturally' in the real life situation. Step by step they overcame the barrier of speaking English in class after practicing in simulated situation and real observation at the hotel. Linguistic mistakes were better controlled by students. Comparing to the context of the study conducted by Magos and Politi,(2008), this finding proved the fact that even the change of English communications context in to the real-life in the hotel or in the classroom, the students could recognize the moment when they made mistakes. They also knew how to approach what they have observed and practiced at hotel and in their class in their English conversation. Unlike the pilot study in this study my students were more confident to face challenges and their limited communication skills were noted as increasing while conserving with "customers". The hotel manger and the receptionist also realized that my students became event more professional after the period they observed and practiced English. The managers and receptionists added that my students could visualize the context of the situations and conducted well with these. This made them be more honored and supportive while taking part in the authentic situations in this study. *(Appendix1)*

Question number three:

Students' motivation in learning English speaking has been clarified when a whole language teaching approach using a combination of simulated situations and authentic ones was applied. My students gained the fullest picture about what they have learnt and what they have

implemented in the real conversations. If their English speaking learning was the theory, their observation at the hotels and role-play were practical. They could acknowledge the important part of the conjunction between learning theory and practice in and out of their class. They could recognize the reason when their learning activities changing as how they could construct their learning for their better achievements. They were able to offer insight in to their learning processes and put in the effort, so their motivation in approaching their linguistics' goal became more natural in the real life situations. They were reflective with pleasure about the challenges in their English speaking learning process Meenaz, S. (2008). This proof claims the facts that the changes of context convince students to speak English more fluency and accuracy.

5. Conclusions

In the book named *"Pedagogy Primer"*, (p.28), Anderson indicated that teachers took the most important role in studying "deliberation and invention, as well as both critical and creative thinking". Therefore, the significance of the study was the process that the researcher was trying to evaluate all possible factors involved in their English teaching job and their students' achievements in learning English speaking by applying role-play in simulated situations in conjunction with task-based approach. In daily language teaching basic, in order to assist their student to meet the English speaking requirements of the society when students graduate from their universities, it is necessary for teacher-researcher approach

new teaching methodology to enhance their students to learn English and employ English for their English target uses.

Also, this study was accessed as a case sample evaluated applying role-play in EFL class in the context of Vietnam. Despite the fact that it had some limitations about the sampling and budget during the research procedure, the concerns of the researcher about the issued statements have been clarified in the case.

Further studies about the impact of context on applying role-play are advised with the caution that the above results are only based on my small case. For a bigger case, researchers should take time to find out more information about their cases before implementation because, as in my situation, there was a small sample (16 students) to conduct comfortably and the expense for this case was acceptable.

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Appendix1:

1. Any room available? 2. How about room rate here? 3. How about room utilities? 4. Payment's condition? 5. Can you discount? 6. Let me see! 7. Please give me your passport. 8. Room number 2.6 on the second floor, Sir. 9. Your change, Madam. 10. Hope to see you again, Madam. 11. Thanks for choosing our hotel	1. Have you got any room available? 2. How much does it cost for a single room? 3. Is it comfortable with wifi, fridge, cable TV, hot water? 4. How should I pay for the expense? 5. Do I have any discount? 6. Yes, that right. 7. Can I have your passport, please? 8. It is room 425, on the fourth floor. 9. Here is your change, Madam.

Appendix2:

For Research question No1

a. What mistakes in linguistics practice (e.g., grammar and word choice) and what mistakes in communication skills (e.g., clarification, probing, making excuses, etc.) do the majority of my students make in my classroom during the first four weeks of the course? What are the frequencies of errors?

b. What mistakes in linguistic practices and communication skills do they overcome in my classroom during the last three weeks of the course? What were the frequencies?

For Research question No.2

a. What linguistic features are used in the authentic situations? How do they use? – Correctly or incorrectly? And Why?

b. What communication skills do the students use and how often and in what context do they use them? – Correctly or incorrectly? And Why?

For Research question No.3

a. How do most of my students feel about the role-play practice in the classroom with the support of a "real" hotel receptionist?

b. How do most of my students feel about the role-play practice in real life situations at particular hotels?

c. What factors make most of my students more motivated to participate in the role-play practice in my classroom as well as in some hotels?