"All the World's a Stage, and All the Men and Women Are Merely Players"
– Are You Ready to Play a Role?

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ABSTRACT

Among the different methodologies for TEFL, role-plays / simulations have been used as a common way for fostering students' learning and practicing the use of English, especially students' oral skills. In Macau, such skills are especially important for college students who are preparing to join the hospitality and tourism industry. These students will need to face different people from varied backgrounds, and when working in the front line, they will need to solve problems for their clients / customers. English, as the lingua franca, will naturally be used during the process. Consequently, students should acquire adequate communicative competence besides bettering their mastery of the English grammar. The objectives of this qualitative study were to find out students' opinions on the effectiveness of role-plays for practicing oral skills and what the barriers were. Five Year 1 students of the Institute for Tourism Studies in Macau were interviewed. The responses given by these students showed their appreciation of role-play as a language learning activity and at the same time, their reluctance to be actively involved in the activity as a result of cultural and psychological barriers. The findings suggest that ESP instructors could put more thought into creating suitable environments that allow students to take up different roles with ease.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, the importance of communicative competence for the learning of English as a Second/Foreign Language has been brought into lights. Many linguists began to emphasize on the need for considering the acquisition of communicative competence in ESL/EFL, in addition to the traditional concerns in the teaching of linguistic competence.

Various linguists have expressed views on communicative competence. Hymes (1972) believes competent speaker of a language should possess the knowledge of the linguistic forms of a language as well as the social rules. Rivers (1973) sees communicative competence as linguistic interaction. ESL learners with communicative competence possess sufficient command of the target language to express ideas properly in different situations. Paulston (1985) suggests the importance of ESL learners' knowledge of the social cultural rules when expressing their meanings appropriately in different social settings. Paulston claims the situation can become complicated if the ESL learner lacks communicative competence. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) believe in order to learn communicative competence, students should be exposed to the various registers they need to know and therefore, role-play is an effective approach for such exposure.

Widdowson (1978) gave his thoughts on the notion of communicative competence. He suggested that English Language Teaching (ELT) should focus on the **use** of language, not the **usage**. Widdowson claimed that 'usage' means the learner's understanding of the linguistic rules, while 'use' refers to the learner's ability to use the knowledge of linguistic

rules in appropriate situations for proper communication, which is essential for successful second/foreign language learning.

Strongly influenced by Widdowson's claim, the communicative approach of language teaching, which stresses on the teaching of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) emerged in the 1970s and has thus been used in various ELT textbooks such as *Headway (by Soars & Soars)*. Such approach has been even more widely adopted in textbooks for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The communicative syllabus is common for numerous ESP textbooks for hospitality and tourism industry. Examples of such texts include *Be My Guest (by O'Hara F.), English for International Tourism (by M. Jacob & P. Strutt), First Class (by T. Stott & R. Holt),At Your Service (by T. Stott & A. Buckingham, Highly Recommended (by R. Revell & T. Stott), High Season (by K. Harding & P. Henderson) and Welcome! (by L Jones).* In all these textbooks designed for ESP for hospitality and tourism industry, the various functions are introduced in different ways, and different formats are employed, yet an indispensable component is the role-play section. The importance of role-plays in communicative syllabuses is therefore apparent.

Definitions of role-play

Littlewood (1981) defines role-play as a technique in which students take up a role for a particular situation and behave accordingly. And role-plays are preferred in the communicative classrooms because they provide students with opportunities for practicing the language needed for different functions (Littlewood, 1981, Robinson, 1981). Role-plays can also benefit learners in the sense that learners are provided with a chance to understand cultural differences between the learners' mother tongue and the target language.

From another viewpoint, role-plays are regarded as an effective activity to provoke groupwork, which can shift learners' attention away from text and consequently allow students an atmosphere to explore their reactions and interpretations and to relate their own experience to ESL (Collie & Slater, 1987).

Reinelt (1988) claims role-plays can encourage more involvement. At the same time teacher can have more flexibility in walking around the classroom and attending to individual students' needs and problems.

When communicative competence is crucial for successful user of the target language, and role-plays are useful tools for acquiring such competence, it becomes clear why role-plays are employed in various text for ESP for hospitality and tourism industry.

Students of IFT aim to join the hospitality and tourism industry after they finished their studies. And according to the survey done by the Institute in 2006 (IFT, 2006), more than 60% of the graduates entered the hospitality and tourism industry after their graduation. Many of the graduates, having been working in the industry found communication skills highly important and would suggest that more emphasis would be put on this area. Graduates, after having joined the workforce appear to be more appreciative to the learning of appropriate ways to communicate in English. An urge for more role-plays and simulations thus arises.

While it appears that role-plays are beneficial to the ESP classroom, can it be effective for Asian students? Experience tells that more often than not, students are reluctant to perform or

play a role in the English class when they are asked to practice functions learned in a particular units either in their own group/pair or in front of the class, assessed or not assessed. Cultural difference may be a factor hindering commitment to role-play practices.

Li and Li (2004) bring in the traditional Confucian culture as a barrier in the ESL classroom. They claim that Chinese students, being brought up in a Confucian culture, "seek compromise between people" and therefore, are not willing to share their views openly in class as they may worry about "losing face or offending others."

When role-plays are believed to be benefiting in the ESP classroom and cultural background may be an opposing force for such learning opportunity, how can ESP teachers eliminate barriers and maximize effective learning?

The objectives of this research paper were to find out students' liking of role plays; if they found role-plays really helpful, students' opinion on role-plays, and whether culture is a crucial factor affecting students' participation.

THE RESEARCH

As the objectives of the research were to find out students' perception of role-plays as ESL activities and the concerns they might have regarding this learning tool, several questions were set for the research:

- Do students have positive opinions on role-plays?
- What might be the merits and/or demerits of role-plays?
- To what extend can role-plays be useful?
- What kinds of settings will students find comfortable for role-playing?

While quantitative methods like questionnaires may include a larger sample and thus help form generalizations, it is limited in the responses given. Data given are restricted to the parameters set in the questionnaire. Respondents are not able to provide reasons for choices they make. An interview with open-ended questions, on the other hand, allows respondents space for more in-depth answers. The sample size is considerably smaller than that of quantitative researches, yet more exhaustive information can be derived from the interviews.

Instrumentation

A set of 18 questions were used to induce students' opinions on role plays. The first 8 questions were for the purposes of screening and demographic use.

Some of the other 10 questions were repeating, allowing students to revisit the issues, hoping to ensure students can give thorough thinking to the questions and then give as much response as possible.

Sampling

At this early stage of the research, focus was put on freshmen. These students have joined the Institute For Tourism Studies for 4 months, attended one English course. Comparatively, they

should have little work experience, thus not sure yet about what kind of real life situations they may need to use English for.

Consequently, the subjects should be of similar age, with similarly little work experience, and therefore, equally little knowledge of the business world they may join in the future.

As this was a small scale research, non-probability sampling was adopted. Students were to join on a voluntary basis. An email was sent to all year 1 students, mentioning the research study. The approximate length of the interview was also mentioned, so students would not be put off by the uncertainly lengthy interviews.

Among the 264 year 1 students, 5 students agreed to be interviewed. They were from the Hotel Management major and Tourism Business Management major. Consequently, they could only be regarded representatives of a smaller population – 178 students of Hotel and Tourism majors.

Ethical issue

All students were informed that such interviews would only be used for the purpose of the research study and all data would be kept with strict confidence. The request for volunteers and the interviews were all completed within the 3 weeks after the final examination and the release of final results. Therefore, there should not be any conflicts with the benefits on the students' parts regarding their grades.

RESULTS

Open-ended interviews allow students to give opinions and at the same time more room for expressing / explaining their views.

The interview questions first investigated students' background, such as their major of studies, perceived English level, mother tongue, medium of instruction in secondary school, their personality, their previous work experience, whether they understood the term "role-play" and if they had done role play before.

The next ten questions asked about students' views of role-plays as activities in the English class, if they found role-plays useful, in what aspects they found role-plays useful, in what setting they prefer for their role-plays, what would encourage/discourage them to do role-plays and if they would take initiative in performing role-plays.

Interview summaries

The summaries capture the main parts of the students' responses, removing the questions from the dialogues. In principle, the summaries reflect the respondents' views in as much their wordings as possible with the persons changed from first to third. Each summary consists of a brief introduction of the student's background, how useful each find role-plays could be, what type of role-plays they liked, if they liked teacher or student as role-play partner, if they liked improvised role-plays, the settings they preferred, if marks could arouse students' interest, and if they would volunteer.

Student A

Student A described herself as an outgoing girl from a northern province of China. Mandarin was her mother tongue and the medium of instruction in her secondary school in China. She is now a Year 1 Tourism student. She had a part-time job before as a free lance writer for a magazine (Chinese).

Student A felt that Role-plays were very useful. It could help students improve oral English, which was an important language for getting a job in the future. She felt that by doing role-plays, she could improve her English, personality, self-confidence, and relationship with other students. Student A found that Role-plays were very important for the English classes because these were the chances to get high marks.

She preferred role-plays that were related to future jobs because she could then be prepared for the future.

If she would need to choose a role-play partner from a student and a teacher, she would prefer a student because that student and herself could learn from each other, and both could benefit from the activity.

She liked improvised role-plays for these would be the time to test students' English proficiency and ability to handle difficult situations, which would be important for the future.

Regarding the atmosphere, Student A would prefer performing role-plays in front of an audience rather than role-play without an audience (i.e. in their own group). Her reason was that role-plays in front of a class could help gain marks. Without an audience, she would not have the chance to build confidence. A video camera would not be a problem for her.

She would not mind doing role-plays for no marks, however, as the activity could help her win in the future.

But she would not be a volunteer when the teacher called for students to perform a role-play for the other students. She felt that it should be the teacher who decided which student should have the practice. But if she saw other students enjoying the role-play, she might volunteer to be the next one.

Student B

Student B was a warm-hearted, positive and ambitious girl from Guangdong who liked challenges. Mandarin was her mother tongue and the medium of instruction in secondary school. She is now a Year 1 Hotel student. She thought her English was a bit above average in her class. She had no work experience before.

Student B liked role-plays because she felt she could discover something that she hadn't known in her life. She could try different roles which she may not have the chance to be in reality. She thought role-plays were useful for experiencing different characters, some of which may be impossible for her to be in real life, for example, a very bad or mean person. She also found role-play useful for improving English, making the class more interesting. But if the student could not play the role well, the rest of the class may not be able to benefit from the observation. So it would be important for the roles to be played well. Student B did not feel role-plays would help much with the future career because it was still very remote. But from the role-plays she could learn something about organizational behavior.

If she could choose, Student B would want to play some imaginary roles, like a princess or a villain, in order to feel what it would be like to be in such positions. She wanted to explore more about human behaviors.

She would not mind having a teacher or a student as her role-play partner, as the scenario would not be real anyway.

She would welcome improvisation role-plays because she loved challenges.

Regarding the atmosphere for role-plays, Student B said that she was more active in doing role-plays in secondary school. But now at college, she felt she was only a 'small potato' that she would feel uncomfortable in front of all the classmates who came from different backgrounds. Meanwhile, she would find it pointless doing role-plays without an audience, and she felt a video camera would impose less pressure than a live audience, because the audience's reaction could affect the performance.

She would still enjoy role-plays even when they were not assessed, because these activities could make college live more colorful.

Student B would not volunteer to demonstrate a role-play in front of the whole class. If no one in the class would volunteer, she wouldn't either. She might be the second one to raise her hand, but she would never be the first one. She believed bonus marks could be good incentives to attract volunteers.

Student C
Student C was a Macau Chinese. Her mother tongue was Cantonese, and it was also the language used in her secondary school. She described herself as an outspoken and cheerful person among family and friends but would be shy and quiet with strangers. She is a Year 1 Hotel student. She felt her English was a bit below average. She had worked before as a surveyor, convenient store attendant, and waitress.

Student C said she liked role-plays because she was a practical person, and role-plays could give chances to practice, which was better than merely listening to theories in lectures. She found the most useful part of role-plays was the research part, when she would need to search for proper information to fill the content of the role-play. She could learn things outside the textbook. She felt that the performance part could not benefit much as the scenarios would restrict the content and the language used. But role-plays could help improve relationship and interaction with classmates. She felt that it was the preparation part when students had to search for information and write the script that was the most useful. Fluency could be improved during the practice and rehearsal time. The need for performing a role-play could arouse students' initiation in doing more reading and writing but practice of speaking skills would be limited. Role-plays would definitely beneficial for future jobs. Theories may not be understood so effectively without role-plays.

If she could choose, she would prefer role-plays for socializing purposes, because these role-plays could help students enjoy the class more. Between a student and a teacher, she would choose to role-play with a student, because their knowledge level would be similar. They would feel more comfortable raising their opinions. But teachers should have more

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knowledge and should be respected, so students would have to be more cautious when doing role-plays with teachers.

She would like improvised role-plays for her practicum class where the practice was on the technical knowledge skills needed. But in the English classroom, when the practice focused on the use of English, she would rather not attempt because other students would pick on her language mistakes.

Student C would enjoy role-play in front of the whole class as she could show what she could do, and because there would be chances for improvisation, it would be challenging. But a role-play without an audience would not be challenging. A video camera would be similar to an audience. She could show her creativity and should be quite interesting.

She would do role-plays even without marks as they could help practice.

Student C said in secondary school, she would definitely volunteer to perform role-plays because there were no language barrier and she would be more confident. Now in college, she felt a bit inferior to other students and would worry about making mistakes. She felt her English was poor, so if she made mistakes, she would give bad impression to her classmates. She did not want her new friends to feel she was weak, and therefore, she would not volunteer to do role-plays in the English class.

Student C said that for her part-time jobs she had received some trainings which also adopted role-plays as a method for learning. She concluded that role-plays could really be useful for learning how to handle different situations, and they were useful for improving English.

Student C also mentioned that she had asked her other classmates why they would not want to be interviewed and the classmates' responses were that they did not support role-plays. They would prefer lectures where they only had to listen. Only those who supported role-play activities would be interested in being interviewed.

Student D
Subject D was a friendly, genuine Pilipino born in Macau, and she liked being with other people. Her mother tongue was English. She studied in an English secondary school. She believed she could speak fluent English as it was her mother tongue but she would still need to improve vocabulary and grammar. She was a Year 1 Tourism student. She has some work experience before as a receptionist and waitress.

Student D enjoyed role-plays, because she liked putting herself in some other people's shoes, feeling what they were feeling. This could help her understand how certain people think the way they think. It could broaden her mind, and understand how her friends feels and think. She felt role-plays were useful, because the others could see a bit of the actor's personality. It helped both the actors and audience. The actors could practice the language. The audience could practice listening and to appreciate the others. Role-playS should be essential for English learning. Aside from writing, it is very important to improve the speaking skills especially in the tourism industry. Every student would have to speak a lot. Role-plays would expose to students what it would be like in the hotel industry and teach them the proper way to deal with the situation; it also help boost students' confidence and it would train students to be spontaneous in what they think. Student D felt role-play was definitely useful for the future career. The role-plays could   expose   students to real life situations. In   the future,

students could relate the situation to what they had learned before. It could be really helpful to the future career.

She enjoyed role-plays for real life situations as it would be fun.

When choosing a role-play partner, Student D would find students, being at the same level, should be equal and therefore, she may need to be careful and not go too far beyond. But still they could learn from each other. But role-plays with teacher could present more challenge because teachers should know more and would give probably some more difficult questions, but it would be challenging and exciting.

She found improvised role-play quite fun as it would force you to think fast which would be very much like in the future at work.

When it came to the atmosphere, she found that role-plays in front of the class could be nerve wrecking, but she enjoyed the audience's reaction and she liked being paid attention to. If there was no audience, she would have more confidence, and less worry about making mistakes, the performance could go more smoothly. A video camera would not be a problem.

She would still enjoy the role-plays even it they were not assessed. It should not matter if there were no bonus marks. What mattered should be if the student could present himself / herself properly, whether students could understand what they were doing and whether they could apply what they had seen and learned.

When asked if she would volunteer, Student D replied that in secondary school, she would volunteer. But now at college she sometimes felt that if it was always her volunteering, it would decrease the chance of the others. It was a dilemma for her. On one hand, she wanted to share what she knew but on the other hand, she would feel depriving somebody else. If she was too active, she would be intimidating the others. Sometimes the classmates needed some encouragement. Sometimes, she would prefer to let the others take the chance.

Subject E
Subject E was Macanese (Chinese and Portuguese parents) and was bilingual (Chinese and Portuguese). He had been educated in North America for 10 years before he returned to Macau to attend college. He saw himself as a quiet and shy person. He was now a Year 1 Tourism student. He said his English was alright; he could express himself quite well. He had a little work experience before as a cashier and a receptionist.

Student E felt role-plays were useful, as they allowed students to explore the other characters and see from their views and to learn different points of view. He enjoyed role-plays and preferred speaking than writing. Yet he did not see role-plays a necessity for the English class but found it a good addition, as role-plays were the fun and educational part in a class. For the future career, it would depend on what kind of job one would want to have. If the job would involve dealing with the public, then role-plays would definitely be useful.

Student E liked the imaginary type of role-plays. He liked to try characters that he would not usually get the chance to play.

He enjoyed improvised role-plays as they let him do quick thinking. He would not feel embarrassed for he liked the challenge.

Regarding the environment, he would enjoy doing role-plays in front of the audience because it would let him practice better and give him chances to speak in the public. Without an audience, it would not be interesting. He would not mind a video camera.

For Student E, it would not be a problem if the role-plays were not assessed, as long as he could learn something from it.

He would volunteer to role-play in the class but he would consider the character first before he would raise his hand. For him, the more role-plays in the English class, the better.
The following table further summarizes the results.

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E
Personality	outgoing	warm-hearted positive, ambitious	outspoken, cheerful with friends, quiet with strangers	friendly, genuine, like to be with people	shy and quiet
Benefits of role-plays	- improve English - help get a job - improve personality, confidence, relationship with classmates, and gain marks	- discover new things in life - play roles different from herself - improve English - make class interesting - can learn about organizational behavior - explore more about human behavior	- give chances to practice - the research part most useful - improve relationship with classmates - improve fluency - help get future job	- understand how other people feel and act - broaden view - helpful to actors and audience alike - speaking skills are important for tourism industry - expose students to the environment - train students to be spontaneous - helpful for career	- allow students to explore other characters and see from their views - fun - useful for career - involving meeting the public
Type of role-play liked	related to jobs	imaginary – princess, bad person	for socializing purposes	related to real life situations	imaginary
Teacher / student	prefer student role-play partner – learn from each other	no difference	prefer student feel more comfortable	teacher is more challenging student can help each other	student – equal position
Improvised role-plays	Yes - test English and ability to handle difficult situation - Important for future	Yes like challenges	Not in English class - Classmates would pick on language mistakes	Yes, force you to think fast	Yes, train quick thinking
Audience	yes, help gain marks, build confidence	Yes in secondary school Not at college	Yes, can show ability - challenging	Yes, liked to be in focus	Yes, chance to practice speaking in public
No audience	Can't gain marks	pointless	not challenging	yes, more confident	not interesting
Video camera	No problem	better than a live audience	No problem – having an audience	like No problem	No problem
No marks	No problem	No problem it makes studies more fun	No problem they help practice English	No problem marks are not important	No problem

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Volunteer	No – teacher should choose students Will follow the others	No May be the second but not the first	Yes in secondary school, not in college, felt inferior didn't want to give bad impression	Yes in secondary school, now rather leave the chance to other classmates	Yes, depends on the character
Drawbacks		cannot help find a job in the future which is far from now.	the performance part restricted students' use of English	her active participation may intimidate others	Not really a necessity for ESL

FINDINGS

The five respondents shared some characteristics in common – similar age (18-19), Freshmen in IFT, having finished one semester, and all expected to join the hospitality and tourism industry in the future.

Yet they were from 5 different backgrounds:

Student A	Mainland Chinese from northern China, speaks Mandarin and educated in Mandarin before joining IFT
Student B	Mainland Chinese from Guangdong province, speaks Mandarin and educated in Mandarin before joining IFT.
Student C	Macau born Chinese, speaks Cantonese and educated in Cantonese before joining IFT.
Student D	Macau born Philipino, speaks English and educated in English before joining IFT.
Student E	Macau born Macanese (Chinese-Portuguese), speaks Chinese and Portuguese and educated in English before joining IFT.

From the summary and the table above we can see Student A was practical and marks oriented. She liked role-plays as she could get more marks, and she repeatedly referred to the usefulness of role-plays to the future.

All except E referred to role-plays as useful for improving English. It is probably because Student E has spent more than 10 years in an all English environment, and is in fact quite a competent English speaker, so that he saw other aspects like understanding other characters, preparation for future career, more important. The others also felt role-plays could help improve interpersonal relationship and increase confidence.

All except B, who had no work experience before, found role-plays useful for future careers. It may appear that students who have been exposed to the real work environment before could relate role-plays, especially those about work situations, to real life.

All of the respondents liked doing role-plays with students. D saw teachers as bigger challenges, while B found no difference between student and teacher role-play partners.

All but C liked the idea of improvised role-plays. They found it a good chance to train quick thinking, which was both challenging and useful for future. C would not like to make linguistic mistakes in front of the classmates.

All but B preferred role-plays in front of the class. Reasons for the choice include chances to gain marks, build confidence, gain attention, show ability, practice public speaking. B said at college, being a small potato, she felt uncomfortable standing in front of the class.

All but D felt there was no point doing role-plays without an audience. D thought she would feel more confident without an audience.

All the 5 respondents unanimously agreed that a video camera would not cause any problems for their role-plays.

Only Student E said he would volunteer for a role-play but depended on the character. The others refused to volunteer for quite different reasons. A believed the teacher should name students, which showed a firm believe in teacher-centered methodology. B showed a need to further build her self-confidence. She firmly said she would be the second but never the first. Also, B was the only respondent who answered negative to the question about audience, even though at the beginning of the interview she described herself as positive and ambitious. She should continue to work on building confidence. C detailed her becoming less confident in herself since she had joined IFT, an all English environment. She seemed to have greatest barrier in freeing herself to enjoy the fun of role-plays. D, on the contrary, had no problem with her mastery of English, but felt uneasy if she would intimidate the other classmates, whose mastery of English may not be as strong as hers.

The 3 Chinese students' (A, B & C) concern about role-playing for an audience or volunteering for role-plays echo to Li and Li's (2004) view on the Confucian culture as a barrier for ESL. Student D's worry reflects the other side of this barrier coin – offending others if she would be more outstanding. Student E, having studied in Canada for 10 years, did not share the same worry.

As learned from C, it seems that other students' ideas about participating in the research study would mean their support to the research topic itself. That is to say, if they agree to be interviewed, it would mean they were supportive to using role plays in the ESL classroom, and that they found role plays useful for learning English. On the contrary, their not responding to the request could reflect their lack of interest in doing role plays, which in turn illuminate Chinese students' preference to passive mode of learning.

CONCLUSION

This study reflects views from 5 individual students from quite different personal background. Similar in age and sharing certain similar interest in studies, they all have quite positive comments on role-plays as an English learning activity. These opinions from 5 students may not represent all the freshmen majoring in hospitality and tourism, their contribution can certainly shed some lights on the improvement of English teaching methodology in the ESL classroom.

The challenge now lies on the design of more fun-filled role-plays that can allow students to perform for an audience without feeling too much anxiety, to learn and to enjoy at the same time. If it is true that the other students' lack of response to the interview request denotes their views against role-plays, a bigger challenge for teachers would be the reforming of students' mindset towards ESL.

"Used properly, games and role-plays can lead to a relaxation of self-imposed limits, to higher levels of creativity and empathy and to a greater acceptance of a new language identity. All of these can bring about a more active interaction in the second language"
(Arnold, 2000)

In IFT, where students come from different cultural and educational background, more emphasis should be put on melting the ice among students, creating a harmonious environment, then students can enjoy and benefit from the role-plays in the ESL classes.

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