

RESEARCH

Integrating Cultural and Religious Narratives through Role-Play: Elevating English Speaking Proficiency in a Post-Pandemic EFL Classroom Thailand

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Abstract

The study explores the integration of religious and local content in role-playing activities to enhance English speaking skills among universty students in Thailand, focusing on a cohort from a university in Pattani province. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning, this study identified a unique opportunity to innovate in language teaching. Thirty students, predominantly those with lower academic performances,

were selected to participate in 10 hours of intensive role-playing sessions. These sessions were uniquely designed to incorporate elements of Islamic culture and local narratives, aligning with the students' backgrounds and beliefs. Prior to the intervention, the students' English conversational abilities were assessed, and a follow-up evaluation was conducted post-intervention. Additionally, student satisfaction with the role-playing methodology was surveyed. The analysis involved comparing means, standard deviations, and conducting a sample t-test. Two significant outcomes were noted: 1) a notable improvement in English speaking abilities among the students, with statistical significance at the 0.05 level, and 2) an increase in student engagement and satisfaction with the role-playing approach. These findings suggest that role-playing, enriched with cultural and religious context, can effectively enhance language skills. The study promotes a pedagogical shift from traditional grammar-focused methods to more culturally relevant and engaging approaches in language education.

Keywords: Role-play in English Instruction, English Conversation Skills, Cultural and Religious Content Integration, Innovative Language Teaching, Post-pandemic Pedagogical Strategies.

Introduction

Despite receiving twelve years of English education in their schooling, Thai students frequently encounter difficulties in confidently and effectively engaging in spoken English at the university level. This challenge persists in a world where English proficiency is crucial for connecting across cultures, economies, and communities in an interconnected, globalized society. One of the potential causes for this gap is that the English curriculum often does not align with the students' backgrounds and life experiences. This misalignment can demotivate them from actively participating in speaking activities and hinder their ability to engage with the language contextually and meaningfully. Although the Thai Ministry of Education has revised its English curricula to improve language proficiency, there remains a significant need to tailor the content to better resonate with the students' cultural and personal contexts, thereby enhancing their confidence and ability in real-world communication.

Moreover, as Larsen-Freeman (2003) observes, traditional teaching methods, particularly in non-native English speaking countries, tend to emphasize structural elements of the language over communicative competence. EFL instruction in Thailand appears to align with this trend. The lessons predominantly focus on reading comprehension, translation exercises, and an exhaustive exploration of grammar and vocabulary (Nunan, 1999). The repercussions of such an approach are profound. Students, in the absence of adequate speaking practice, grow increasingly conscious of their speaking abilities. The fear of committing errors, combined with a lack of practice, leads many to avoid spoken interactions entirely (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Addressing this imbalance is not just a curricular necessity but a broader educational imperative. The solution lies in adopting innovative, student-centered teaching methodologies that prioritize spoken interaction. Among the many pedagogical strategies, role-playing stands out for its efficacy. As Richards & Rodgers (2014) suggest, role-playing immerses students in realistic linguistic scenarios, prompting them to navigate conversations, make spontaneous decisions, and actively employ their language skills. Unlike traditional teaching methods, where students might passively receive information, role-playing propels them to be active participants. Research, such as the work by Hoofd (2022), lends further weight to this approach, echoing the sentiments of scholars like Willis & Willis (2007) who emphasize task-based language teaching.

Given this backdrop, the focal point of this research is clear: to innovate EFL instruction in Thailand by incorporating role-playing exercises. But the goals are manifold. While the primary objective remains to bolster spoken fluency, the research also aims to achieve secondary, albeit equally important, outcomes. It seeks to instill confidence in EFL learners, ensuring they approach spoken English without trepidation, a notion supported by the ideas of Krashen (1982) in his affective filter hypothesis. Additionally, by making lessons interactive and reflective of real-world interactions, it hopes to foster a genuine love and passion for the English language (Harmer, 2007).

In essence, this research represents a step towards holistic English education supported by their cultural and religious legacy, where students not only learn the language but also embrace it, use it, and thrive with it in the global arena.

Theoretical Foundations

The research synthesizes principles from sociocultural, constructivist, and affective filter theories. It is anchored in Lev Semenovič Vygotskij's sociocultural theory (Vygotskij & John-Steiner, 1979), highlighting the impact of students' cultural and religious contexts on cognitive and linguistic development. This is complemented by Piaget's constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1955), which emphasizes active learning and the importance of aligning learning content with personal experiences and cultural identities. Further, Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) plays a crucial role in this study. Krashen posits that emotional factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety significantly influence language acquisition, and a supportive, culturally resonant learning environment can lower the affective filter, facilitating more effective language absorption. By integrating role-play activities that reflect Islamic and Thai cultural narratives, the study aims to create a conducive educational environment, enhancing language proficiency and harmoniously blending linguistic skills with the students' cultural and religious identities.

Objectives of the Research

Comparative Linguistic Proficiency Evaluation: To measure and compare the English spoken competencies of the students prior to and following the implementation of role-playing pedagogical methods aligning with their personal experiences and cultural identities.

Feedback and Experience Assessment: To ascertain the levels of satisfaction among the students, seeking insights into their personal experiences, perceived benefits, and any potential areas of improvement after partaking in culturally enriched role-playing exercises designed to improve their spoken English proficiency.

Research Methodology

1. Sample Group Selection:

The study took place in the first semester of the 2022 academic year, focusing on 30 first-year university students at Fatoni University in Thailand. These students were enrolled in a compulsory English as a Foreign Language course in their initial year at the university. Selected through purposive sampling, their participation in the research offered valuable insights into the unique challenges and learning dynamics of English language acquisition in this specific cultural and educational context, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic.

.2. Instruments for Data Collection:

2.1 A comprehensive English Speaking Learning Management Plan, integrating role-playing activities tailored for this demographic.

2.2 An English speaking test, which was administered both prior to and post the integration of role-playing techniques.

2.3 A detailed student satisfaction questionnaire intended to gauge the students' perception and experiences post role-playing sessions.

3. Development of Research Tools:

3.1 The preliminary stage involved a meticulous review of pertinent literature, documents, and previous research to inform the creation of research tools.

3.2 Subsequently, a test instrument was crafted, integrating role-playing scenarios that reflect the students' cultural identities and religious environment. This approach aims to evaluate speaking skills, focusing on fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and comprehension, within contexts familiar and relevant to the students.

3.3 This instrument was then presented to three field experts for review and feedback. Emphasis was placed on ensuring the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) for accuracy. Feedback from these experts was integrated to refine the tool further.

3.4 The finalized quality tools underwent a pilot run to ensure their efficacy.

4. Experimental Procedure and Data Collection:

4.1 Initially, the objectives of the pedagogical approach, which integrates students' personal experiences and cultural identities in role-playing activities to bolster English speaking skills, were clarified to the student sample group. A total of four distinct learning management plans were prepared, spanning over a four-week period, with sessions held thrice weekly.

4.2 A pre-test, consisting of an English speaking test based on 8 distinct scenarios (2 per plan), was administered. Students selected one scenario per plan via a dragging method.

4.3 The teaching and learning process was executed as per the four learning management plans, emphasizing role-playing activities.

4.4 A post-test, identical to the pre-test, was then conducted.

4.5 Upon completion of the role-playing sessions, students filled out the satisfaction questionnaire.

4.6 The collected data were subsequently readied for statistical analysis.

5. Data Analysis:

5.1 Initial data validation was carried out through expert reviews.

5.2 Comparative analysis of students' test scores, before and after the application of role-playing techniques aligning with students' personal experiences and cultural identities, was performed using the T-test dependent.

5.3 Students' satisfaction data, pertaining to the role-playing sessions and their impact on English speaking skills, were statistically analyzed to determine mean scores and standard deviations.

Results

The research results are presented in two main parts. The first section highlights the progress of EFL students in their speaking skills, comparing their performance before and after implementing role-playing activities that were enriched with cultural content. The second part examines the students' perceptions and reactions to these role-playing activities, focusing on how they resonated with their personal experiences and cultural identities, and the impact this had on their learning experience after participating in the exercises.

Part 1: Assessment of Learning Achievements

The following table showcases the comparative analysis of the students' performance in English speaking, pre and post the induction of role-playing activities:

Table 1: Comparison of Learning Achievements Before and After the Role-playing Activities

Test Phase	N	Mean Score	SD	Mean Difference (D)	T-statistic
Before class	30	11.17	1.05	6.33	24.39*
After class	30	17.50	1.17	-	-

* Statistically significant at the .05 level

It can be inferred from Table 1 that the post-instruction mean scores ($\bar{X} = 17.50$, $SD = 1.17$) depict an enhancement when compared to the pre-instruction mean scores ($\bar{X} = 11.17$, $SD = 1.05$). The t-statistic value of 24.39 solidifies the notion that the role-playing activities significantly bolstered the English speaking abilities of the students, rendering this pedagogical shift not just beneficial but statistically consequential.

Part 2: Student Satisfaction Analysis

Post the completion of all role-play driven sessions, the contentment and response of the students were gauged. A conspicuous high level of satisfaction was noted, as evidenced by the mean score ($\bar{X} = 4.28$, $SD = 0.61$).

Table 2, provided below, depicts the specific areas of satisfaction in descending order based on mean scores:

Table 2: Analysis of Students' Content Satisfaction

Assessment Criteria	Mean	SD	Level of Satisfaction
Role play mirrors students' daily life encounters and their cultural background.	4.53	0.50	Highest
Role play content captivates interest.	4.43	0.50	High
Clarity in understanding language/vocabulary patterns.	4.10	0.70	High
Role-play content strikes a balance in difficulty and student level.	4.03	0.75	High

Table 2 clearly highlights that role-play activities, which were closely aligned with students' daily life experiences and cultural backgrounds, received the highest satisfaction ratings from the students. Furthermore, the engaging nature of the content, the clear understanding of language constructs, and the well-calibrated difficulty level further cemented the students' approval and appreciation of this teaching methodology.

2.2 Analysis of Student Satisfaction Regarding Role-playing Activities

The following section of the study focuses on how students felt about the integration of culturally enriched role-playing activities into their curriculum. It assesses their satisfaction levels, particularly exploring how the inclusion of cultural content in these role-playing exercises influenced their engagement and learning experience.

Table 3: Analysis of Students' Satisfaction in Role-playing Activities

Assessment Criteria	Mean	SD	Level of Satisfaction
General satisfaction with culturally enriched role-playing activities	4.52	0.49	Highest
Role-playing reflects real-life scenarios	4.63	0.48	Highest
The applicability of role-playing in daily life	4.53	0.50	High
Role-playing tailored to meet student needs	4.47	0.50	High
Role-playing facilitates self-paced learning	4.13	0.67	High

As illustrated in Table 3, the students' overall satisfaction with culturally enriched role-playing activities, when examined, was underscored by the high mean scores. The most commendable feature was that culturally enriched role-playing exercises mirrored real-life circumstances ($\bar{X} = 4.63$, $SD = 0.48$). This realism in the content ensured the students could discern the applicability of these exercises in their quotidian lives ($\bar{X} = 4.53$, $SD = 0.50$). Moreover, the fact that these activities were perceived to be calibrated to student needs ($\bar{X} = 4.47$, $SD = 0.50$) and facilitated an autonomous learning pace ($\bar{X} = 4.13$, $SD = 0.67$) bolstered their efficacy in the eyes of the learners.

In summary, the unanimous high satisfaction scores underscore the potential of role-playing as a pedagogical tool, especially when considering its alignment with students' background and real-world scenarios and its effectiveness in catering to individual learning paces and needs.

2.3 Analysis of Student Satisfaction Concerning English Proficiency via Role-playing Activities

The following section of the study examines the students' satisfaction levels, particularly noting the impact of culturally embedded content in the role-playing activities on enhancing their English proficiency.

Table 4: Analysis of Students' Satisfaction in English Proficiency via Role-playing Activities

Assessment Criteria	Mean	SD	Level of Satisfaction
Overall satisfaction with English proficiency	4.51	0.61	High
Applicability of English knowledge in daily life	4.63	0.48	Highest
Culturally embedded role-playing's effectiveness in bolstering English speech	4.53	0.62	Highest
Culturally embedded role-playing's role in spurring academic curiosity	4.47	0.67	High
Enhancement in understanding of English language	4.40	0.66	High

Emerging from the findings detailed in Table 4, the data pinpoints a predominantly high level of student satisfaction concerning their English proficiency—this is especially true post induction of role-playing in their curriculum. Most notably, students felt that the knowledge garnered from these sessions had real-world applicability ($\bar{X} = 4.63$, $SD = 0.48$). Further buttressing the importance of these activities, students indicated that they significantly ameliorated their English speaking prowess ($\bar{X} = 4.53$, $SD = 0.62$).

Beyond this, these role-playing sessions were also found instrumental in nurturing an environment where students were eager to learn more ($\bar{X} = 4.47$, $SD = 0.67$) and had a discernibly improved grasp over the English language ($\bar{X} = 4.40$, $SD = 0.66$).

To encapsulate, the data points to a promising intersection between culturally enriched role-playing activities and improved English proficiency, with students unequivocally acknowledging the positive influence of such pedagogical strategies in their language learning trajectory.

2.4 Analysis of Student Satisfaction from the Learner's Perspective via Culturally Enriched Role-playing Activities

The succeeding segment of the analysis turns its focus on the learners' experiences and the degree of satisfaction they derived when culturally enriched role-playing activities were integrated into their curriculum.

Table 5: Analysis of Students' Satisfaction from the Learner's Perspective

Assessment Criteria	Mean	SD	Level of Satisfaction
Overall satisfaction from the learner's side	4.45	0.54	High
Culturally enriched role-play enhancing interest in studies	4.63	0.48	Highest
Culturally enriched role-play facilitating a positive attitude towards English learning	4.50	0.50	High
Culturally enriched role-play in boosting students' learning motivation	4.37	0.60	High
Culturally enriched role-play in fortifying student confidence in English usage	4.30	0.59	High

Drawing insights from Table 5, students overwhelmingly showcased high levels of satisfaction in relation to culturally enriched role-playing's influence on the learner's side. Undoubtedly, culturally enriched role-playing was seen as a robust tool in kindling a renewed interest in academic pursuits, particularly evident with the mean score of 4.63 and a standard deviation of 0.48.

In addition to this, there were other multifaceted benefits recognized. These encompassed a constructive shift in the students' attitude towards English learning ($\bar{X} = 4.50$, $SD = 0.50$), a palpable surge in motivation to immerse themselves in learning ($\bar{X} = 4.37$, $SD = 0.60$), and lastly, culturally enriched role-playing sessions served as catalysts in instilling heightened confidence levels in students when it came to employing the English language in real-world settings ($\bar{X} = 4.30$, $SD = 0.59$).

In essence, from the learner's vantage point, culturally enriched role-playing is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative experience that brings about perceptible improvements in interest, attitude, motivation, and confidence in English language acquisition.

2.5 Student Satisfaction concerning Teaching Materials via Culturally Enriched Role-playing Activities

The subsequent segment of the study ventured into gauging the impact of culturally enriched role-playing activities on the teaching materials' effectiveness.

Table 6: Student Satisfaction regarding Teaching and Learning Media

Assessment Criteria	Mean	SD	Level of Satisfaction
General satisfaction with teaching media	4.47	0.54	High
The Impact of Culturally Embedded Materials on Enhancing Interest in Learning Content	4.57	0.50	Highest
Contribution of materials to enhancing speaking skills	4.50	0.50	High
Materials facilitating easier lesson comprehension	4.43	0.56	High
Age-appropriateness of the teaching materials	4.37	0.60	High

Table 6 provides a detailed overview of student satisfaction levels regarding the teaching and learning materials used in the study. The data reveals a notably positive trend, with an impressive average satisfaction score of 4.47 and a standard deviation of 0.54. This indicates a high degree of satisfaction among students with the teaching materials provided.

Upon further examination, the teaching materials demonstrated considerable effectiveness in several key areas. The materials notably excelled in sparking student interest, as shown by a mean score of 4.57. Additionally, they were effective in improving speaking skills (mean = 4.50, SD = 0.50), making lessons more understandable (mean = 4.43, SD = 0.56), and aligning well with the age group of the students (mean = 4.37, SD = 0.60). This detailed analysis underscores the materials' role in enhancing various aspects of the learning experience.

Reviewing the overall findings, the study highlights the success of integrating culturally themed role-playing activities with teaching materials. This approach significantly enhanced student satisfaction. The conclusive data shows a strong positive response from students to the culturally relevant role-playing, aimed at improving English speaking skills. The satisfaction level

was notably high, with an average score of 4.4 and a standard deviation of 0.54, reflecting the effectiveness of incorporating cultural content into the role-play exercises.

Discussion

The implementation of culturally themed role-playing activities to foster English speaking skills among 30 EFL students yielded noteworthy results. These students, when assessed post-intervention, not only showcased heightened test scores in comparison to their pre-test results but also reported a significant level of satisfaction with the culturally themed role-playing method. The discussion of these findings is expounded upon below.

1. Advancement in English Speaking Skills:

When standard methods were used to assess English speaking skills, there was a notable increase in post-test scores compared to pre-test scores. A deeper analysis into specific areas of language proficiency revealed a hierarchy of improvement: fluency showed the most significant improvement, followed closely by accuracy, and then the tone of speech. This indicates that the teaching approach was particularly effective in enhancing these aspects of English speaking skills.

The marked improvement in post-test scores can be attributed to the immersive and culturally relevant role-playing activities, strategically designed to mirror an Islamic context. These activities engaged students in scenarios that seamlessly integrated routine university situations with aspects of Islamic practices. Examples of such scenarios included participating in a Halaqah or Islamic learning circle, deliberating over Islamic historical events, and conducting religious dialogues, in addition to standard university life experiences such as requesting directions on campus, negotiating in simulated market environments, and ordering food in diverse settings.

This fusion of daily life with religiously significant contexts in English was crucial in ensuring that the students' educational experiences were closely tied to their Islamic heritage, thereby enhancing language acquisition and engagement. This approach finds strong support in the theoretical foundations of sociocultural theory (Vygotskij & John-Steiner, 1979) and Krashen's

Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Vygotskij's theory emphasizes the importance of cultural context in learning, suggesting that students learn more effectively when the content is relevant to their cultural background. Krashen's hypothesis underscores the role of emotional factors in language acquisition, proposing that a lower affective filter, achieved through culturally responsive and engaging educational environments, facilitates better language learning. By incorporating role-play that is both culturally and religiously resonant, the study aimed to create an educational setting that was not only linguistically enriching but also emotionally supportive, in line with these theoretical perspectives.

The direct implication of this continuous practice was students' improved fluency in English. Such findings are congruent with previous research that emphasizes consistent practice, especially in pronunciation, both at individual and group levels. The emphasis on active questioning, answering, error correction (spanning across pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax) serves as a template for linguistic application, a fact corroborated by the study on learners.

In summary, role-playing activities have been recognized for their effectiveness in enhancing language skills, as they immerse students in scenarios that foster cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning (Maier, 2002; Rao & Stupans, 2012). These activities encourage empathy, perspective-taking, and deeper cognitive connections to material, making learning more engaging and effective (Westrup & Planander, 2013). They have been successfully applied in various fields, including language learning, showing increased student engagement and knowledge retention (Livingstone, 1983). The current study aligns with this body of research, demonstrating the benefits of role-play in language education, especially when tailored to cultural contexts.

2. Satisfaction with Role-Playing Activities in Learning:

Role-Playing Activities Relevance:

Students particularly resonated with role-playing activities that mirrored real-life situations and catered to their interests and immediate needs. The practicality of these activities enabled learners to integrate the knowledge they acquired into their daily interactions. Suchada (2013) affirmed that engaging in realistic simulations and regularly drawing upon prior experiences and learned knowledge fosters deeper understanding and facilitates real-world

application. This practical approach subsequently reduces the apprehension associated with speaking English.

Acquiring Knowledge and Skills:

The high satisfaction level derived from the repetitive practice embedded within role-playing activities reinforces language proficiency and amplifies the confidence to engage in English communication.

Use of Instructional Media:

The incorporation of authentic media in role-play, such as appropriate attire and realistic settings, was pivotal in enhancing student satisfaction. Wipasiri (2021) contends that the authenticity of these elements galvanizes students' learning enthusiasm.

Learner's Perspective and Attitude:

The students' positive inclination towards role-playing activities is palpable, and this might be attributed to the enjoyable and stress-free learning environment they facilitate. Kesuda (2007) underlined that such activities amalgamate learning with play, eliminating the trepidation of English communication and catalyzing language acquisition.

Pertinence of Content:

The high level of satisfaction with the content stems from the relatability of the role-playing scenarios to students' daily experiences. The simplicity and familiarity of the content encourage students to contextualize their knowledge, focusing on meaning extraction and practical application. This tangible approach aids in the comprehension of narratives and the proficient utilization of linguistic elements.

The research conclusively shows that culturally themed role-playing significantly improves English speaking skills in EFL students. The results after the intervention surpassed those of the initial assessments. Analysis of student satisfaction across five areas showed uniformly high levels, supporting the hypothesis that role-playing, tailored to reflect engaging, age-appropriate daily life scenarios, greatly enhances language learning. These practical activities

not only aid in quicker comprehension but also effectively boost English speaking ability. This immersive approach increases students' confidence and renews their enthusiasm for learning.

Suggestions

Further Exploration of Culturally Themed Role-Playing Activities in Educational Contexts:

Given the pronounced impact of culturally themed role-playing activities in refining English speaking competencies as observed in the present research, there is a compelling case for broadening our exploratory lens to discern its potential in myriad educational dimensions. The following sections encapsulate areas that warrant further investigation:

Expanding the Skill Spectrum:

Communication Dynamics: Culturally themed role-playing's dialogic nature makes it ideal for enhancing comprehensive communication skills, including non-verbal cues, body language, and communication etiquette.

Cultivating Active Listening: Inherent in culturally themed role-playing, active listening is a skill that can be developed through these interactive dialogues. This aspect is crucial for effective communication.

Reading Comprehension and culturally themed role-Playing: Integrating role-playing scripted narratives may improve reading comprehension and fluency, exploring how active participation influences reading skills.

Writing Through Role-Playing: Encouraging students to create their culturally themed role-playing scenarios can enhance writing skills, focusing on creativity, narrative structure, and linguistic coherence.

Enhancing Realism in Educational Strategies:

Contextual Relevance: The study underscores the importance of realism in educational settings. Exploring the effect of different levels of realism in role-play scenarios on learning effectiveness is a valuable area for further research.

Learning Environment: The classroom environment plays a crucial role in role-play activities. Research could focus on identifying the most effective classroom settings for culturally themed role-play and their impact on learning outcomes.

Technology in Role-Playing: With the increasing use of technology in education, investigating the effects of culturally themed role-playing in digital environments, such as virtual or augmented reality, is a relevant topic.

Incorporating Cultural and Religious Elements: Recognizing the importance of cultural and religious relevance, it's beneficial to study how integrating local cultural and religious aspects affects the success of role-playing exercises.

Concluding Perspectives:

This initial study emphatically demonstrates the effectiveness of role-playing in enhancing English speaking skills, particularly when it incorporates cultural and religious content. This inclusion offers a wealth of opportunities for further exploration. Examining role-playing's diverse effects across various skills and contexts, especially when integrating cultural and religious elements, could allow educators to maximize its benefits. Such an approach promises a learning experience that is not only more engaging but also richer and more rewarding for students, deeply rooted in their cultural and religious identities.

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